

HIRO AINANA

ILLUSTRATION BY
SHRI

DEATH MARCH ⑮
TO THE PARALLEL WORLD RHAPSODY





DEATH MARCH 18
TO THE
PARALLEL WORLD **RHAPSODY**



MIA
A taciturn elf who loves music.

LULU
Born in the Kuwork Kingdom. She is Arisa's older sister.

ARISA
A former princess of the Kuwork Kingdom. She was Japanese in her previous life.

NANA
An expressionless homunculus.

SATOU
A twenty-nine-year-old programmer who has been transported to a parallel universe.

Celebrating the New Year with some tasty *osechi* dishes!

Preparing for the preschool field expedition
is so much fun!

TAMA

A cat-eared girl.

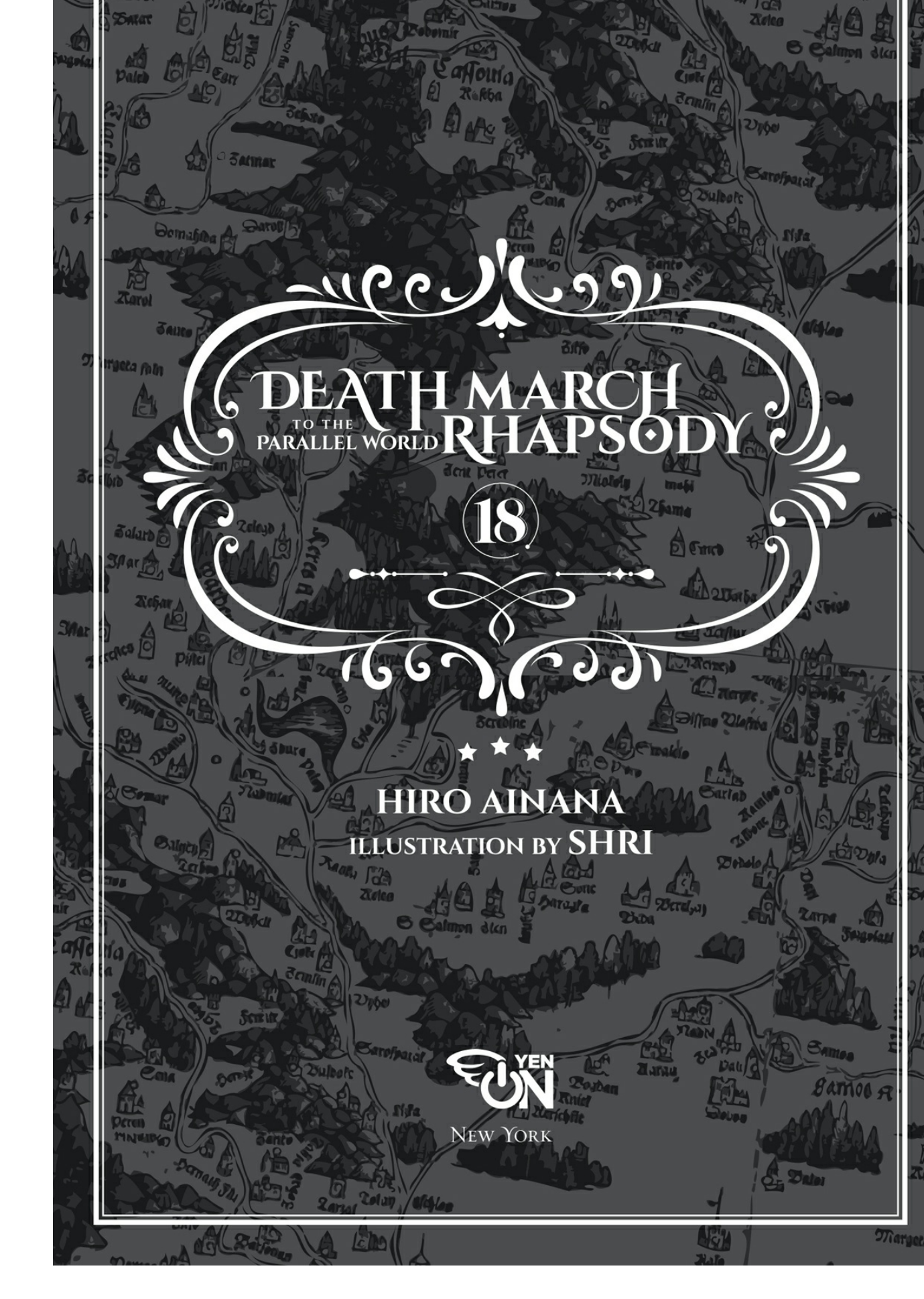
LIZA

A scalefolk girl.

POCHI

A dog-eared girl.





DEATH MARCH TO THE PARALLEL WORLD Rhapsody

18

★ ★ ★
HIRO AINANA
ILLUSTRATION BY SHRI

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UN

NEW YORK

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Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody, Vol. 18

Hiro Ainana

Translation by Jenny McKeon

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The New Year

Satou here. When I was a kid, New Year's was packed with fun activities. But since becoming an adult, I often end up working all the way up to New Year's Eve in the end-of-the-year crunch, and half the time I sleep through New Year's Day.

"My apologies for the wait. The soba noodles are ready now."

Lulu entered the dining room of our royal capital mansion, her silky black hair fanning out behind her and her Japanese features as indescribably lovely as ever. The apron she wore was a perfect complement to her wholesome image.

The maids of the mansion followed her into the room, placing bowls full of buckwheat noodles and delicious-smelling bonito-stock soup on the table. Judging by the color and scent of the broth, today's soba was Kansai-style.

"Awesome! You gotta have soba for dinner on New Year's Eve!"

Arisa, a reincarnation from Japan and Lulu's younger half sister, cracked her knuckles in anticipation. Her lavender-colored hair, normally hidden beneath a blond wig, bobbed in time with her movements.

"Mm. Tradition."

Mia nodded in quiet agreement. Her slightly pointed elf ears peeked out from below her light-blue-green twintails.

The hero Daisaku had proliferated Japanese culture a few hundred years ago in her homeland of Bolenan Forest, including the practice of eating soba noodles on New Year's Eve to symbolize the transition into the New Year.

"The ingredients are simple, I report."

With her trademark unusual way of speaking, the blond-haired buxom beauty Nana peered down at her soba, which was topped only with sliced green onions.

As a magical man-made life-form, a homunculus, she had the appearance of a teenager despite being “born” only about a year ago.

“It appears the toppings are yet to come.”

Liza, who was blissfully inhaling the scent of the soup stock, turned her attention toward a cart that the maids were bringing into the room.

In addition to her scarlet hair, Liza had orange lizard-like scales on her wrists, neck, and long tail that marked her as a member of the orangescale tribe.

“It’s meat, sir!”

This exclamation came from Pochi, a young girl with dog ears, a dog tail, and brown hair in a short bob. She pointed with sparkling eyes at a plate piled with thin cuts of sweet-and-sour stewed meat.

“Big shrimp tempura, toooo...?”

Next to Pochi was Tama, a little girl with cat ears, a cat tail, and short white hair, who broke into a big grin at the sight of the shrimp, seafood, and vegetable tempura next to the plate of meat.

“Please help yourself to whatever toppings you’d like.”

With that, Lulu placed a few tongs next to the plates of toppings.

“*Très bieeeen—?*”

“Pochi wants meat, sir!”

I piled generous helpings of meat onto their noodles, and Tama and Pochi lit up like they were about to dance for joy. Tama’s tail stood straight, and Pochi’s wagged so violently that it looked like it might break free and fly away.

“Meat for you, too, Liza?”

“Yes, please. Thank you very much.”

Liza accepted her meat-topped soba with a calm expression, but her tail swayed rhythmically, revealing her inner excitement. The tail didn’t lie.

“I’ll stick with the classic shrimp tempura, thanks.”

“Lots of mushrooms and fried veggies.”

Arisa and Mia added tempura to their bowls.

“Maybe I’ll keep to the traditional toppings, too?”

“Then I will do the same.”

When I went for the shrimp tempura, Lulu happily picked tempura as well.

“What about you, Nana?”

“I will maintain the default settings.”

“You mean just the chopped green onions?”

“Yes, master. The small green onions are cute, I declare.”

Ah, of course. This was typical of Nana, who loved all things small and cute.

“All right, master. Say a few words.”

Arisa suddenly demanded a speech from me, no doubt on a whim.

“You did great this year. We got into all kinds of trouble, like getting caught up in a labyrinth made by a demon and fighting a demon lord...”

Not to mention that we’d done battle with some Evil God’s Spawn that very afternoon.

During the Evil-Cleansing Ceremony that was traditionally held on New Year’s Eve, Cardinal Hozzunas of Parion Temple had somehow summoned an army of demons and Evil God’s Spawn in an attempt to destroy the royal capital of the Shiga Kingdom.

Thanks to my friends, the demon army was driven back, and the Ancestral King Yamato and the sky dragon showed up just in time to help defeat the three Evil God’s Spawn.

We spent the rest of the afternoon at the royal castle helping to clean up and rescue people. But now that everyone had been rescued and the rubble blocking the main exits was cleared, we had left the rest up to the authorities and headed home.

“...So I’m really happy that we were able to make it through the year without any serious injuries or illnesses. Here’s to another year of staying healthy and enjoying every day.”

After my simple speech, Liza led the girls in a chorus of cheerful hurrahs.

“Now then, let’s eat. I’d hate for these wonderful soba noodles to get soggy.”

I prompted everyone to dig in, and Arisa gave her usual *thanks for the food!* to get things started.

“Mr. Soba won’t stay still, sir.”

“So slipperyyy?”

Pochi and Tama were struggling to capture the noodles. They’d gotten much better with chopsticks, but the thin, slippery noodles were still a challenge.



“We do have forks as well, you two.”

“No, sir. That would be giving up, sir.”

“We fight until we wiiin?”

Noticing their struggle, Lulu offered them forks with a paw-mark design, but they insisted on using their chopsticks to do battle with the soba noodles anyway. Since they were attacking the noodles they managed to lift from the side, both of their bangs were getting soaked in broth.

I'd better put them in a bath later.

With such thoughts on my mind, I brought my own chopsticks to my bowl.

“Mm, that's good.”

The taste of soba spread through my mouth.

Crunchy shrimp tempura was always good, of course, but shrimp tempura that had been softened by soba broth had its own unique taste and appeal.

Drinking that hot soup with the loosened tempura bits filled your whole body with warmth to the very core.

“You should all eat, too. Don't worry about waiting on us.”

I beckoned to the maids who were on standby against the wall.

The head maid refused at first, but I convinced her on the grounds that it was a special occasion. The staff had looked after our mansion even when the royal capital was under threat of destruction earlier that day, which seemed like more than enough reason to let them enjoy some tasty noodles with us.

“...Maybe this is why noodles aren't popular in the royal capital,” Arisa whispered to me as she watched the maids gingerly nibbling on their noodles.

They seemed reluctant to slurp up the noodles in the traditional Japanese method, instead twisting them around a fork or drinking them along with the broth.

Later, when the pot of soba noodles was empty and the toppings had vanished into the stomachs of the beastfolk girls and the maids...

“Ding-dooong?”

Tama’s sharp ears picked up the distant sound of the city bells announcing the time.

“Liza, open the window, please?”

Once Liza complied with Arisa’s request, I could hear the bells ringing even without my “Keen Hearing” skill.

“It doesn’t sound quite the same, but this is basically a temple bell ringing in the New Year, right?” Arisa patted her stomach in satisfaction as she listened to the bells. “*Akeome*, everyone! *Kotoyoro!*”

“H-N-Y, sirs.”

“*Kotoyoooo?*”

The rest of the group all returned Arisa’s casual New Year’s greeting, even if they didn’t know what it meant. Arisa frequently made references to Japanese culture that she rarely explained, so the other girls must have been used to it by now.

“Master, we should do *hatsumode*, too!”

“Hat sumo daaay?” Tama tilted her head.

“It’s the first shrine visit of the New Year,” Arisa explained.

“Does the Shiga Kingdom have a *hatsumode* tradition?”

“I do not know of this ‘Hatsumo Day,’ but I have heard that some people in Seiryuu City go to pray at temples at the beginning of the year.”

Liza added that she had never participated herself, however.

“Let’s do our own *hatsumode*, then.”

Parion Temple was closest to here, but judging by my map, it was still swarming with soldiers and knights investigating the situation with the cardinal.

It might be better to venture a little farther and go to the Tenion Temple instead.

“Oh, right, but before that...”

I pulled out some small pouches from my breast pocket.

“Wait, are those New Year’s gifts? Like *otoshidama*?!”

“That’s right.”

“It’s not mochi in there, is it?”

“I wouldn’t pull anything that elaborate.”

Apparently, the *otoshidama* tradition had started with small bags of mochi being given to children, but I didn’t have so much free time on my hands that I would make fresh mochi just for that. These days, most people just gave money.

“But mochi is delish, sir.”

“Yummyyy?”

Pochi and Tama protested Arisa’s comment.

Putting that aside, I handed out the New Year’s gifts.

“Thankeee?”

“Hooray, sir!”

“Thank you, master, I declare.”

I was met with a chorus of thank-yous from the girls.

Each pouch contained a gold coin and a small card with a message. Although it was a little embarrassing, I figured it might make them happier than money alone.

The kids all broke into smiles as they read their cards.

Yeah, it was worth the effort.

“E-erm, us too? Are you sure?”

“It’s a token of my thanks for all your hard work. Please accept it.”

I gave out pouches to all the maids, too; they contained the same amount of money as I gave my kids. The head maid got just a little bit extra.

“Thank you very much, young master.”

All the maids bowed vigorously as they thanked me.

A few of them peeked inside the pouches and let out shrieks of delight, prompting a scolding from the head maid. Even she was wearing a barely concealed smile instead of her usual strict expression, though, so I think she felt the same way as the rest of them.

I told the maids they didn't need to do a night shift tonight, permitting them to go home.

But of course, since it was dangerous to walk the streets alone at night, they were welcome to stay over in the guest rooms if they wished.

About half the maids were staying the night, including the head maid. I left them in charge and headed for a shrine visit with my companions.



"There's a lot of people out walking tonight."

Just as Arisa observed, the street was full of people carrying lanterns, candlesticks, and so on.

No one was riding in carriages, not even us. The "red-roped monster" incident earlier in the day had left many of the roads in shambles.

"Yes, it looks like they're all going to temples, too."

"I'm sure they are still uneasy."

Lulu and Liza conversed quietly.

When we reached the Tenion Temple, there was a line of worried-looking faces at the entrance.

The young priestesses were going around to the people in line, using Holy Magic spells like Bless and Affection to calm those in need.

Since this temple was in the noble district, most of the people in line were nobles' servants and lesser nobles and their families like me. The wealthier permanent nobles and their families were probably allowed to enter without waiting in line.

"Smells goood?"

“I smell wheat, sir.”

Tama and Pochi sniffed the air eagerly, and one of the people in line smiled kindly at them.

“Ha-ha, they’re handing out buckwheat dumplings on the other side of the chapel. You’ll have to wait a little longer, kids.”

Since buckwheat dumplings were made out of the same flour as soba noodles, maybe this was sort of like the New Year’s soba tradition in Japan?

“Oh, looks like it’s our turn.”

The people in front of us dropped penny coins and copper coins into a basket held by a priestess at the door as they entered.

“I’m sorry, this is my first time visiting a shrine on New Year’s here. Could you explain?”

Since I wasn’t sure what was going on, I decided to just ask flat out.

“This is called *saisehn*. It’s a tradition the ancestral king Yamato started in the Shiga Kingdom alone, so perhaps you’ve never heard of it.”

Saisehn...like the Japanese tradition of offering money to the gods?

Back in the royal capital, I’d only ever donated to Parion Temple, so I dropped a pouch containing twenty gold coins or so into the box.

It might be a bit much, but after the incident that afternoon, the temple would probably have lots of expenses offering food to the needy and helping to rebuild the city.

“G-goodness! Pardon me. Were you seeking a special worship ceremony?”

The satin pouch must have given the priestess the impression that I was looking for special treatment.

“No, regular worship is fine,” I said, and we entered the chapel.

The interior was fairly similar to that of the Tenion Temple in the old capital. A crowd of people knelt before the holy seal at the center of the chapel, praying fervently.

I couldn’t blame them for wanting to turn to religion at a time like this,

considering how the Evil God's Spawn and a demon army had darkened the sky over the royal capital earlier that same day.

We joined the masses in prayer, then exited through a different door.

"What did you pray for, master?"

"The good health and safety of my family, I suppose. And you?"

"A lovey-dovey life with my dear master!"

"Right." I brushed off that doomed desire and turned to the rest of the kids instead.

Behind me, Arisa cooed some ridiculous phrase like, "Your coldness just makes me want more!" but I pretended not to hear so I wouldn't encourage her.

"Pochi prayed to eat lots of meat, sir!"

"Tama tooooo!"

"I prayed that I will meet many larvae, I report."

"I prayed for everyone's health and...the rest is a secret."

"Mine as well."

Pochi's, Tama's, and Nana's responses were just as I expected, but Lulu and Liza bashfully refused to elaborate.

"Oooh, tell me!" Arisa cried, pressing the two of them to spill their secrets. I was pretty sure saying things like, *I won't tell, I swear!* is a guarantee that you can't be trusted.

"And you, Mia?"

"Nothing."

"Whaaat? You really didn't pray for anything?"

"Mm."

Mia nodded and launched into one of her rare speeches.

"The gods don't exist to grant wishes. That's wrong, you know. You're supposed to show appreciation for the happy days you've spent so far. So I

thanked them. It's true!"

Maybe she meant that the elves believed that gods watched over people as opposed to answering their prayers?

"Master, over here, sir!"

"Hurrrrry?"

Pochi and Tama waved at me eagerly.

Beyond them in the courtyard, priestesses were serving hot soup.

"Dumpling soup?"

"Looks like they put the buckwheat dumplings into broth."

The dish was like a combination of *suiton*, flour dumplings in soup, and *sobagaki*, buckwheat dumplings. I think there was a similar dish back in Japan.

We'd just eaten our New Year's soba noodles earlier, but since it was being offered and purportedly good luck, I decided to partake with the others.



"What a lovely sight."

Finding myself unable to sleep after we got back from the shrine visit and the rest of the group went to bed, I sat in the courtyard with a cup of sake and treated myself to some nighttime cherry-blossom viewing.

The sakura trees in the garden were great, but the Royal Sakura in the distance was lit up, creating a scene as magical as it was beautiful.

"...Hmm?"

As I absentmindedly scrolled through my battle log from the day, I noticed something odd.

> Special ability Unit Deployment activated.

I opened my menu to investigate.

The Unit Deployment option, which had always been grayed out and unusable, was now available to select.

It was a special ability—a Unique Skill.

The only reason I could think of that it would suddenly be activated was defeating the Evil God's Spawn.

For just a moment, I remembered how my left arm had turned black when I was afflicted by the energy of the divine blade, but I would hate to think that was what triggered this change. If it was, it'd be all too tempting to think, *Maybe if I let my right arm get afflicted, it'll unlock Unit Creation, too!*

"Master, are you having difficulty sleeping?"

While I gazed at the nighttime sakura and sipped my sake, Liza approached me.

I closed the menu and held up my sake cup to Liza in greeting.

"I'll go to bed once I've admired the flowers a little longer."

Although I doubted anything else would happen tonight, there was always the possibility that the people behind all those incidents were still up to no good.

I wanted to enjoy my drink and the view a little longer under the pretense of keeping watch.

"Would you like some, too, Liza?"

Liza had a tendency to fall asleep after consuming almost any amount of alcohol, which kept me from offering her any when we were out and about, but here I could at least carry her to bed.

"Certainly, thank you."

Liza put down her spear and sat beside me.

Gratefully accepting the sake cup, she drank it down in only a gulp or two.

"Want another?"

"Yes, please."

Liza and I shared Shigan sake as we spoke of the future.

There was the matter of peerage, of getting ahead in life, of being freed from slavery, of her hopes for the future. The alcohol helped ease these earnest conversations that were difficult to discuss when sober.

“My spear is ever in your service, master. If you would allow it, I will gladly devote my loyalty and soul to you until my last...”

With that, Liza drifted into slumber, the sake cup still held in her hand.

Good night, Liza. Here's to another year of adventures together.



“Now it should be safe to test things out here.”

After I carried Liza to bed, I went to the secret base I'd built near the royal capital to experiment with Unit Deployment.

The notes column in my menu stated only, **Unit Deployment: relocate one's units within one's domain.** *That doesn't explain much.*

“Maybe I'll start with golems for now?”

I used the Earth Magic spell Create Earth Servant to make a generic golem.

“Unit Deployment—”

When I spoke the words with focused intent, the golem teleported directly to my side.

None of my MP was used. I didn't feel tired or anything, either.

After testing with the golem a few times, I used the Summoning Magic spell Summon Bat to bring in a small bat and was able to teleport it with Unit Deployment without a problem. Using it on a living thing was no harder than with the golem.



“Can I teleport myself, too? ...Guess so.”

Unlike the Return spell, I didn't feel any flow of magic power or the unusual sense of space warping around me.

The dryads' fairy rings and the teleport mirror in the secret base felt similar to Return; Unit Deployment must function in a different way than Space Magic.

“And I think there might be a little bit of a time lag?”

There was a slight lag before the teleportation kicked in, although that might be because I wasn't used to it yet. As of now, “Warp” or “Flashrunning” seemed more effective for short distances. It might be handy for moving around areas with lots of obstacles, though.

“Looks like you can move via map selection, too...”

I tried teleporting within the same map area.

“Yeah, that works. What about other maps?”

I changed the map and checked again.

“Hmm... Looks like there are limits on where I can go.”

I considered the available teleportation options.

Starting with the closest places: anywhere on my current map, the royal capital mansion, most of my teleport points in other areas, our house and the orphanage in Labyrinth City, the explorers' school, the Ivy Manor, our villa and hot springs in the Celivera Labyrinth, most of the great desert, our tree house in Bolenan Forest, and anywhere in the Valley of Dragons. Rakuen Island in the southern seas wasn't on the list.

I was starting to get a sense of how it decided what counted as my domain.

It seemed to work on any map where I controlled the mana source or any buildings that I owned.

Of my teleport points, I couldn't use any that were in buildings that I didn't own or create with something like Stone Object, including the summer house at the royal castle or the ones in various points in labyrinths.

I teleported back to the royal capital to test it out and found that the only

buildings I could transport into were our royal capital house and the Echigoya Company headquarters. Even on the same map, I couldn't use it to enter places that weren't under my specific control, it seemed.

I was able to teleport anywhere in my range of vision regardless of whether I controlled the map, though.

“Does long-distance teleportation work, too?”

I tried using Unit Deployment to move myself from the royal capital manor to the westernmost point of the great desert.

In an instant, I was standing in the dark of the dunes.

“Hmm, it doesn't take any time or spend any magic... Isn't this a little *too* convenient?”

I wasn't tired, either. This Unique Skill had all my long-distance-transport needs covered, to the point where it was almost alarming.

While there was the condition that it had to be my own domain, I could easily get around that by using spells like Stone Object or Create House to make a random building, and there was plenty of vacant land in this world that didn't belong to anyone. In fact, I could teleport almost anywhere I'd been at least once with basically no limitations.

“The only problem is...”

Did this really come without any kind of price?

My Unique Skill menu carried no risk, but other reincarnations like Arisa couldn't use their Unique Skills too much without damaging their “soul vessels,” which came with the danger of ultimately turning into a demon lord.

According to the reincarnations who lived in the bottom stratum of the labyrinth, like Yuika and Mukuro, active skills were more dangerous than passive skills, and most dangerous of all were the ones that involved insta-kill or barrier-breaking attacks.

Unlike the passive skill Menu, Unit Deployment was most definitely an active skill.

It was probably best not to use it too lightly.

In the worst-case scenario, if Demon Lord Satou made his debut, that could very well spell the end of this world.

I had better stop this investigation if I sensed even the slightest change.

“Let me test one more thing, and then I’ll head home.”

I shook my head to dispel my sleepiness and tried using Unit Deployment to move from the edge of the great desert to the farthest possible place, the Valley of Dragons.

The world around me became a dawn-lit wasteland.

“I haven’t been here since— Ooooooof!”

In the middle of my sentence, I felt a massive amount of magic energy flow into my body.

What in the world is happening?

A rainbow of color engulfed my vision.

Oh no, at this rate my body will be destroyed from the inside and—

“...Master! Master, wake up!”

My blacked-out vision abruptly returned to normal.

Arisa was leaning over me, tears spilling from her eyes.

“Arisa? What’s wrong?”

My voice was hoarse, and my mind was still hazy.

“Where are we?”

“The secret base! You didn’t come back all night, and when I came to look for you, I found you passed out on the ground! I couldn’t get you to wake up no matter how hard I shook you. I thought you were dead, you know!”

Arisa clung to me tightly, and I patted her back.

After a moment, my memories started to clear up.

I had been experimenting with Unit Deployment and teleported to the Valley of Dragons, where a huge amount of magic flowed into me. The last thing I remembered was thinking that I was in big trouble.

I must have used Unit Deployment to bring myself back here right before I passed out.

Most likely, I chose this place because there wouldn't be any casualties in case something went wrong, and otherwise one of the girls might come to my rescue.

"Sorry. I unlocked a teleportation Unique Skill, so I was testing it out."

Once I explained what kind of skill it was, Arisa shouted at me furiously, her eyes still filled with tears.

"What were you thinking, using an active Unique Skill over and over with no idea if it has a limited number of uses?!"

"I know. I'm sorry."

The truth was that I had gotten a little carried away with excitement at my convenient new skill.

While I apologized and reassured Arisa, I checked my log in the AR display.

As far as I could tell, there was no evidence in the log that anyone had attacked me in the Valley of Dragons.

For some reason, though, there was a log that the empty skill I'd acquired after defeating the Evil God's Spawn had activated.

When I was suffering from the excess magic flowing into me, my menu had been wildly flashing on and off in response to my panic. No doubt some malfunction had activated the glitched skill in the process.

There was now a nameless skill at the bottom of my list, so I immediately turned its effects off just to be safe.

"Seriously, you have to be more careful! Next time you want to test something like that, you'd better borrow my soul shell garland."

"Okay, I will."

I promised Arisa that I wouldn't overuse the Unit Deployment ability, and we went back to the royal capital together.

As I changed into formal wear in my room in the mansion, I thought back on

what had happened in the Valley of Dragons.

The moment I used Unit Deployment to teleport there, a massive amount of magic power started flowing into me.

It felt like my life was in danger, but as far as I could tell from my log, I hadn't actually been attacked.

And since Unit Deployment didn't use magic power, I doubted that it was an effect of overusing that skill.

The more likely possibility was that it was simply all the magic from the Valley of Dragons mana source flowing into me, not an attack at all.

But when I'd first come to this world and gained control over the Valley of Dragons mana source, I felt perfectly normal afterward.

Maybe this happened because a ton of magic had built up there after leaving it alone for almost a year, but I had no intention of going back to find out. Even if I might be able to handle it better now that I knew what was coming, I definitely didn't want to experience the feeling of magic nearly tearing my body apart from the inside again.

I'd better not go back to the Valley of Dragons unless it was absolutely necessary.



"Best wishes to you in the New Year!"

When I dressed up in my formal outfit for the New Year and went to the living room, the maids were waiting in a line to greet me in unison.

Evidently, this was the traditional greeting for the New Year here.

"I pray that you all have a blessed year as well."

I didn't know how to respond, but luckily, Liza stepped in for me. I echoed her words to the maids.

"There you are, Miss Liza! Master, wait a little longer for breakfast, please."

Arisa came flying into the room in a hurry, grabbed Liza, and ran away.

I heard cheerful voices from far off.

After I waited for a while, the girls entered the room all dressed up.

“Ta-daaa!”

“Dah-dee-daaah?”

“Frilly dresses, sir!”

“*Furisode.*”

“Wow, you all look very cute.”

Arisa, Tama, and Pochi struck poses in their matching *furisode*, long-sleeve kimonos, while Mia played a familiar New Year’s shamisen tune on her lute.

Arisa’s kimono was decorated with a rose pattern, Mia’s with lilies, and Pochi and Tama wore matching sakura patterns with hidden paw marks. They’d each picked out their favorite colors for the base fabric.

“This doesn’t look strange on me, Lulu?”

“Not in the slightest. It suits you perfectly.”

Lulu’s kimono was patterned with swans. Maybe this was a reference to the tale about the ugly duckling?

“Is it truly permissible for me to wear such extravagant garb?”

“Of course. Your usual sharp outfits suit you well, but so do fancy clothes like this. You should wear them more often.”

Liza was wearing a peony-patterned *furisode*. Though she looked a little embarrassed, I didn’t think she disliked it.

“Master, please compliment me, too, I entreat.”

“You look beautiful, Nana. Like a princess.”

Nana spun around in her chick-patterned kimono, her hair ornament jingling.

Once I’d complimented each of the girls in their fancy *furisode*, we moved to the dining room to eat breakfast.

“Ooh, *très bieeeen?*”

“It’s a feast! Sir!”

The girls were delighted to see the *osechi*-style New Year's dishes lined up on the table.

Lulu had re-created these dishes based on recipes from the elf village and the food-loving nobles from Ougoch Duchy, Marquis Lloyd and Count Hohen.

I was too busy with other things to help much, so I was excited to taste it all.

"You even made a whole roasted sea bream? That's next level!"

"That was from one of Count Hohen's recipes. It's said to be good luck."

Arisa clapped her hands in glee, prompting a smile from Lulu.

"This giant shrimp is sashimi, right?"

"Yes, they were a bit too large. We grilled some smaller ones instead."

Since these fresh shrimp were three times the size of a lobster, it would probably be a waste to just grill them.

As usual, Arisa gave the signal of *thanks for the food!* before everyone started digging in.

"Ham ham haaam?"

"The magical thick-cut roast beef is amazing, too, sir."

Tama and Pochi were sticking with the standard meat dishes.

I started with the white miso soup, a classic New Year's dish, to whet my appetite.

"Mm, that's good."

The perfectly reduced soup stock drew out the flavor of the rice cakes and vegetables.

Between the dense softness of the boiled taro and the daikon radishes and carrots that seemed to melt as you chewed them, the depth of flavor was truly delicious.

The single round mochi in my bowl must have been made a few days earlier so it wouldn't melt away in the stew.

"Satou. Shiitake, kuwai root, black soybeans. Yummy."

Mia stuffed some food into my mouth.

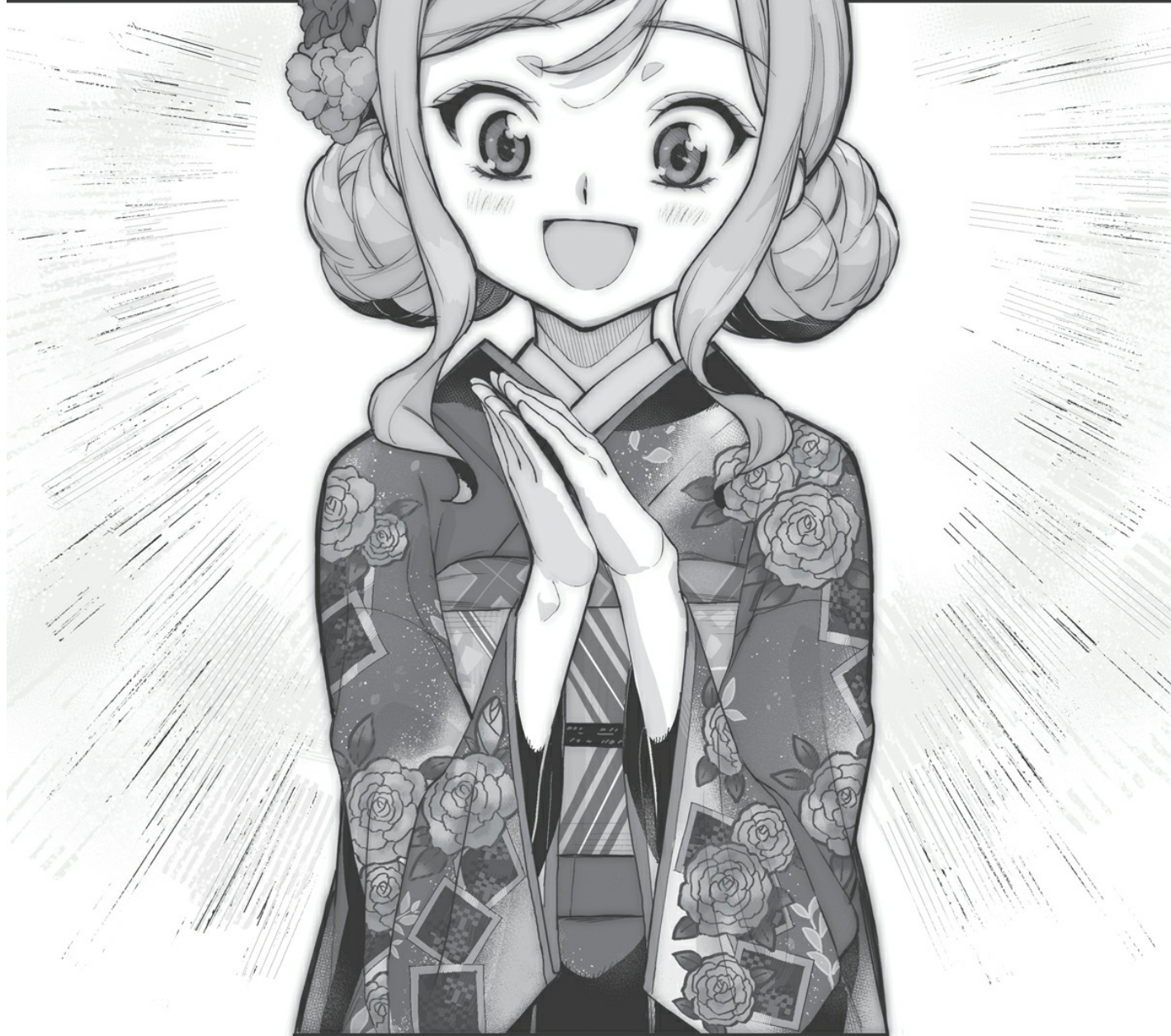
I had never seen the ladle-shaped kuwai roots, a kind of tuber, outside of New Year's. Their tough texture was a little unusual.

"Very nice," I agreed, then turned to Lulu. "I'm surprised you were able to find these."

"Miss Nea procured them for me."

If anyone could get their hands on such an unusual ingredient, of course it would be the obsessive elf chef Nea.

"Master, the sweet *kinton* is delicious, too, I report."



“Yeah, it is. This is made with chestnuts, not sweet potatoes, right?”

“Yes, that’s what the recipe said... Oh dear, would it have been better to make it with sweet potatoes?”

“No, I think there are lots of different ways to prepare it, so don’t worry.”

The truth was, I had only read about the sweet mashed potato and chestnut dish in cooking manga and never actually tasted it before.

“This *boudara* has a nicer firmness before it is cooked, yet the flavor is better afterward. It’s difficult to say which I prefer.”

I was pretty sure *boudara*, a dish of dried codfish, was stupidly tough before it got cooked. I guess Liza’s powerful teeth and jaws made it more enjoyable, though.

“Nothing like sea bream wrapped in kombu or grilled to make it really feel like New Year’s.”

Arisa was stuffing her face with all kinds of food.

I was doing my best to taste each of the dishes, too, finishing up by charging onto the battlefield of ham and roast beef. My chopsticks stopped short at a plate emptier than a scorched wasteland, but the maids immediately brought over more, allowing me to complete my conquest of the table.

For some reason, ham and roast beef just tasted better when they were served in the traditional multitiered *osechi* box.

“That was yumyyy?”

“I’m so full, sir!”

Everyone let out sighs of satisfaction.

“Yes, it was a wonderfully elaborate New Year’s meal. Thank you very much, Lulu.”

“Thaaanks...?”

“Thank you, sir!”

Liza thanked Lulu, prompting the rest of the group to follow suit.

“Thanks from me, too, Lulu. You made a really delicious meal.”

“Hee-hee, I’m glad you all enjoyed it.”

Lulu blushed and smiled.

“But it was so delicious that I almost overate.” Arisa patted her belly above her *obi* belt, then looked at Liza’s slim stomach. “Hmm? Miss Liza, did you not eat enough?”

“No, I enjoyed a very full meal.”

“I thought so. Of course you ate a lot... So why is your stomach still so flat?”

“Sheer force.”

Arisa gave Liza a doubtful look; the lizardfolk girl clarified.

“I use my muscles to forcibly compress the contents of my stomach.”

“Huh? For real?”

“Yes. I’m sure you could learn to do the same, Arisa.”

“Whoa... I bet you could kill at a talent show.” Arisa shook her head, stunned.
“Pochi, Tama, you can’t do it?”

Pochi and Tama were rubbing their full bellies, looking pleased.

“Nyooo...?”

“I can, but I don’t want to, sir. It would be a waste to get rid of my happy full belly, sir.”

“*Oui, oui.*”

Tama and Pochi nodded wisely. Somehow, I wasn’t surprised.

Arisa turned her attention to me.

“Master, when are we going out today?”

“The New Year’s royal-audience ceremony is taking place at the royal castle in the afternoon, but I think we should head over to Baron Muno’s place, too.”

I wanted to exchange New Year’s pleasantries with the baron and company before heading over to the royal-audience ceremony together. From what I was

told, all the lords and heads of noble families from the royal capital area were expected to attend this ceremony. Our peerage and promotion ceremonies would take place there, too.

“Okey-dokey. We’d better get changed, then, girls.”

“You’re not going in your *furisode*?”

“Hmm, they are nice and all, but I wouldn’t want to stand out too much at the ceremony and get hassled by some stupid nobles. We’ll just wear normal dresses.”

Fair enough.

After the royal-audience ceremony, a coming-of-age ceremony would take place in one of the royal castle’s courtyards, where nobles and commoners alike became adults.

Back in Japan, youngsters who wanted to stand out tended to wear flashy outfits for coming-of-age. It was probably even worse here in the Shiga Kingdom, where the coming-of-age ceremony took place at age fifteen, the height of puberty.

Fancy accessories and ornaments had been selling like crazy at the Echigoya Company. If the girls went in their *furisode*, they would look unusual enough to draw way too much attention.

“Okay, we’re ready.”

While I was reflecting on all this, Arisa and the others came back from changing their outfits.

They were even wearing a bit of makeup, though it still looked natural.

“Come on, Lulu! Time to win master’s heart with your pretty-girl power!”

“W-wait, Arisa! Don’t push me...!”

...Oooh.

What stood before me looked like a delicate work of glass art.

It didn’t give a cold impression, though. If anything, her youthful beauty was reminiscent of a white peach.

As adorable as she'd been in the *furisode*, Arisa's makeup skills and a fairy-silk white dress brought Lulu's already beautiful looks to another level.

Though I'd modeled the dresses after a more mature, modest version of the latest fashions, today was Lulu's coming-of-age ceremony. Maybe I should have gone for something a little more adult-looking instead.

"Hey, master, I get that you're speechless, but you're making Lulu nervous. Hurry up and say something, will you?"

"Ah, sorry... You look beautiful, Lulu. More than any model or idol I've ever seen."

I was careful to let my earnest feelings show so it wouldn't sound like a cheap line.

"Thank you, master! That makes me so happy to hear."

Lulu smiled at me like the sun.

I hoped today would be a happy and memorable ceremony for her.



"Best wishes to you in the New Year!"

"I pray that you all have a blessed year as well."

Visiting Baron Muno's royal capital home to ring in the New Year, we were greeted by Pina, Erina, and the other servants of the baron's family. We exchanged the traditional Shiga Kingdom greetings I had just learned earlier.

"Are those new apron dresses, you two?"

"Uh-huh! Oh, it's only the apron part that's new, though."

"Miss Erina!" the newbie hissed urgently. "You don't need to tell them that."

"Sir Knight, the baron awaits you..."

"Right, of course. I'll head on in."

I parted ways with Erina and the others, following a maid to the parlor room where the baron and company were waiting.

"Akeomeee?"

“Kotoyoro, sir.”

Spotting the baron, Tama and Pochi blurted out the rather casual phrases Arisa had taught them earlier.

“Ah, those are the New Year’s greetings of the Hero’s kingdom, yes?” The baron patted their heads and added, “Happy New Year.”

Not surprising from one of the biggest Hero researchers around.

“Akeome, was it? Let us have another good year.”

“Yes, Happy New Year. I look forward to another year of working together.”

Sitting across from Baron Muno, Viscount Lottel stood up and echoed a more formal version of the sentiment, then moved to sit next to Baron Muno instead.

“You’re all dressed especially nicely today, Arisa.”

“Well, it’s a special occasion. We’re being granted peerage, and Lulu has her coming-of-age ceremony.”

Arisa struck a little pose as she responded to Nina.

“Where’s Karinaaa?” Tama tilted her head.

“She’s getting dressed in her room at the moment.”

The dot on my radar indicating Miss Karina moved toward us. She must be done changing clothes.

Within moments, Karina strode through the still-open door.

The Intelligent Item Raka glittered atop her impressive bust, which I could still only describe as *magic boobs*.

“My best wishes to you in the New Year.”

Her vermilion dress was a perfect match for her luxurious golden ringlet curls.

It was probably a new dress made by an artisan in the royal capital. The fabric used was the Lalagi-made crimson silk I’d given her.

The gems and accessories she wore looked familiar, too. I was glad she seemed to like my gifts.

“Byootifuuul...?”

“Very, very pretty, sir!”

Tama and Pochi bounced around Karina delightedly.

Karina turned bright red and gave me a somewhat expectant glance.

“The new dress looks lovely on you, naturally. All the gentlemen at the ceremony won’t be able to take their eyes off you.”

As I spoke, I reached out and removed a piece of lint from her hair.

“D-d-d-d-don’t be ridiculous!”

For some reason, what was meant to be a harmless compliment made Karina turn bright red and go flying out of the room.

I must have gotten her flustered by standing too close.

“Karinaaa...?”

“Wait up, sir!”

Tama and Pochi hurried after Miss Karina in concern.

“Too close.”

“Honestly! If you’re going to make a pass at someone, start with your darling Arisa!”

Mia and Arisa huffed at me.

“You’re more than welcome to make a pass at Lady Karina.”

“Yes, I’d be quite comfortable entrusting my daughter to you, Satou.”

Thanks, but I wasn’t planning on it.

I brushed off Miss Nina’s and the baron’s comments with a vague smile and changed the subject to the royal-audience ceremony.

“Will you and Lady Karina be going to the ceremony as well, Miss Nina?”

“Yes, generally a noble’s first wife and children participate. I would’ve liked to sit it out to prepare for the kingdom meeting that starts tomorrow, but since I have the honorary viscount title, I was told I should attend.”

Nina grumbled something about the hardships of court service.

“If you’d like to come to the kingdom meeting, I can bring you along as a consul’s assistant?”

“Thank you, but I’ll pass.”

“You sure? Once you become a viscount, you’ll have to participate anyway. Might as well get some experience while you have the chance.”

All higher-ranking nobles had voting rights at the kingdom meeting, even if they weren’t in an important government role. As such, it was apparently commonplace for nobles to attend and vote for anything that favored their territory.

“No need to worry about that. I’m sure this will be my last promotion.”

“Is that right? Because I have a feeling you’ll make it to viscount within the next two or three years.”

Though Miss Nina looked confident, I couldn’t imagine getting promoted to a permanent noble rank unless something out of the ordinary happened.

A baronet or baron would be one thing, but surely a nobody like me from who-knows-where would never be promoted all the way to viscount.

“By the way, did Sir Orion not come with you to the royal capital?”

I didn’t see Orion, who had said he intended to have his coming-of-age ceremony here.

“Orion will be having his ceremony in the old capital instead.”

“I thought it was bad luck when I first heard that his airship would be delayed two days due to a skypower engine malfunction, but after what happened yesterday, I’m actually grateful.”

Because of the disaster from the day before, any airships headed for the royal capital had been made to turn back.

“Perhaps that boy was born under a lucky star after all,” Nina added.

Soon, a lady’s maid came to inform us that it was time to go, and we all headed for the entrance.

“Let’s go, master!” Arisa tugged on my arm. “Awww, I suppose we won’t be

able to call you that much longer...”

“How cooome?”

“Well, once we’re promoted, we won’t be slaves anymore, right? Won’t we have to call him *mister* or *young master* or something?”

The beastfolk girls looked shocked at this.

“Boooo...?”

“D-do we really have to, sir?”

Tama and Pochi looked around as if seeking rescue.

“Miss Nina, what do you think?”

“Hmm? What they should call you? Whatever you want is probably fine, but I’d hold off on *young master*. People will think they’re servants of the house.”

Come to think of it, the maids at home all called me *young master*.

“Then what are we supposed to call him?”

“In Satou’s case, maybe *Sir Knight* or *Sir Pendragon*?”

“I dunno, that sounds so formal...”

Admittedly, it did give an overly distant impression.

“Then why not just keep calling him *master*?”

“Huh? Can we?”

“Sure. It’s quite common for freed slaves to keep calling their former owner *master*. As long as you’re not worried about people knowing you used to be slaves, you can keep doing that if you’d like.”

The beastfolk girls all beamed at this.

“Yaaaay...?”

“That’s what Pochi wants, sir!”

“Master, is it all right if we continue to call you *master* in the future?”

“If that’s what you want, then sure,” I responded to Liza’s serious inquiry.

“What about you two, Arisa and Lulu?”

“We’ll stick with *master*, too, of course. Sooner or later, I’ll get you to marry me so I can call you *sweetie* or *darling* anyway.”

I’d rather not, especially the darling part.

That made it sound like I’d get stuck playing tag with the fate of the planet on the line, like a certain alien anime.

“I’d prefer to carry on like the others, too.”

Lulu was the last to chime in.

Evidently, they’d continue calling me the same thing, then.

We piled into a few carriages as we went on chatting, and we headed to the royal castle with Baron Muno and company.



“Feels like we’re zigzagging an awful lot.”

“That’s because they’re trying to navigate around the broken cobblestones.”

Our carriage trundled along slowly. While it probably would’ve been faster to walk, it was bad manners to show up to the royal castle on foot.

Through the window, I could see Earth Magic users repairing the walls and roads and golems carrying rubble away.

“Floatyyy?”

“It’s magic, sir.”

Tama’s and Pochi’s eyes sparkled at the sight of a hovering boulder.

Looking at the mage with a long staff standing in front of it, I guessed that he was using the Practical Magic spell Magic Hand to help clear debris.

I saw some priests and priestesses using purification magic to help clean, too.

Of course, it wasn’t all mages and priests. There were plenty of soldiers and laborers bustling around, too.

“They’re working so hard, even though it’s New Year’s...”

Arisa sounded impressed.

All the rescue efforts and the first round of rubble removal had been finished overnight, but it looked like it would be a while before the royal capital was fully restored to normal.

“This is quite a long line...”

Lulu was right: When we reached the gates of the royal castle, there was a long line of carriages in front of us.

We waited at the back of the line with Baron Muno and company; before long, our carriages were guided out of the line and moved forward.

“Perhaps we’re getting special treatment as a feudal lord and his vassal?”

Arisa tilted her head.

Curious as well, I opened my map and investigated and found that most of the people in the line were lesser nobles and wealthy people participating in the coming-of-age ceremony.

Those who were here for the royal-audience ceremony were able to come in through a separate entrance farther into the castle grounds.

When we arrived at this entrance, we disembarked from our carriage to find a sparkling scene of noblewomen in glittering jewelry and noblemen decked out with countless medals.

“Baron Muno and company, correct? Allow me to guide you to the waiting room.”

An elderly veteran maid appeared with several younger maids in tow, leading us to a large, lavish waiting room. It was big enough that it could’ve fit fifty people comfortably.

According to my map, there were some fifty other waiting rooms of similar size, and less than a third of them were full.

“Feudal lords usually have their families and vassals in tow,” Miss Nina explained.

I nodded, sipping the refreshing fruit-infused water the maids had brought us.

We chatted among ourselves in the room for a while until the same maid

returned.

“Allow me to guide those being elevated to peerage to the ceremony hall.”

Apparently, people entered in order of social class, starting with the lowest.

I moved to follow my companions, but the maid stopped me.

“Sir Pendragon, please enter alongside Baron Muno.”

Maybe I was in a different class because I was going to be promoted to a permanent baronet.

After waiting another thirty minutes or so, we were guided to the hall as well.

...*Whoa*.

The spacious audience hall was packed to the brim with seated nobles.

Although my kids were sitting at the very edge of the hall, the sharp-eyed Pochi spotted me right away and waved wildly, earning a scolding from Liza.

I gave them a small wave and kept moving forward.

Where the line of honorary single-generation nobles ended, permanent noble families followed, then the heads of those families at the front. It looked like only upper nobles were allowed to bring their whole families.

Baron Muno’s family had a front-row spot in the noble-family section, where Nina and Karina broke off from our group to sit.

Miss Nina was in the family section because Karina had begged not to be left alone.

Normally, I would be in the honorary-noble line, too. Instead, though, I joined the front row with Baron Muno and the other feudal lords, dukes, and so on. I was surprised to find that we were last among the nobles.

The Scarlet Nobleman Jelil Mosaddo, a mithril adventurer, was at the end of the last row.

This must have been the place for people getting promoted to permanent nobles, then.

I gave him a light nod, then sat where the official instructed me to, next to the

baron.

Mr. Jelil was giving me a look of surprise, but there was no time to talk before the court orchestra struck up a magnificent tune.

The royal family entered, followed by the prime minister and Mr. Juleburg, the leader of the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga, and finally the king himself. Once he took a seat on his throne, the royal-audience ceremony began.

The king's New Year's greetings and speech went on for more than ten minutes; evidently, important people tended to prattle on even in a parallel world. Personally, I found his high praise of Nanashi the Hero a little embarrassing.

"Now then, let us begin the peerage and promotion ceremonies."

Almost an hour into the event, our promotions began.

"Leon Muno, please step forward."

Baron Muno approached the throne and knelt, looking nervous.

I tried to hide my amusement when he nearly fell over several times in the process.

"Leon, it is with pride that I have watched you restore a ruined territory and become a true lord. You put a stop to the plots of multiple demons and defeated a demon-led army of monsters despite your forces being greatly outnumbered. These accomplishments, and your hard work behind the scenes, are more than worthy of a promotion."

The king's voice was full of warmth.

Baron Muno's eyes welled with tears, clearly moved by the praise.

"Feudal Lord Leon Muno, I hereby promote you to counthood."

"I humbly accept my post."

After this exchange in the Shigan language, the king held a royal bell made out of something like sapphire and recited a chant.

■■■ ***Convert Peerage Roku Shaku.***

I'd never heard this particular spell before.

When the chant ended, a blue light formed lines around Baron Muno and the king, creating a sort of figure eight between them.

The rings of light shone on their surroundings for a while.

Eventually, the light evaporated toward the heavens and earth, and Baron Muno's title and rank changed to Count.

His ceremony over, Count Muno bowed to the king and returned to his seat.

There were no cheers or applause, which must be an unspoken rule. Instead, however, the orchestra swelled with a grandiose melody.

Next, the late Count Lessau's eldest son underwent a succession ceremony and became the new Count Lessau.

During this part of the ceremony, my "Keen Hearing" skill picked up comments like, "He's not cut out for this," and, "Shouldn't he be demoted?"

Since he'd lost his capital and more than half his army in a demon attack, evidently many nobles felt he was unfit to be a feudal lord. The young Count Lessau had a difficult road ahead of him.

"Sir Satou Pendragon, please step forward."

When my name was called, there was a stir from the upper nobles' area.

I'd assumed we would be called in order of rank, yet now I was being called on ahead of Jelil, a baronet.

I felt a slight sense of dread as I knelt before the king.

"Knight Satou Pendragon, you have proven yourself with countless accomplishments in the Muno territory, Ougoch Duchy, and Labyrinth City Celivera, as well as your aid in defeating several demons in the royal capital, leading your subordinates to defeat a floormaster in Celivera Labyrinth, and fending off a giant monster attack just yesterday here in the royal capital, showing strength worthy of the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga. We have also received letters of commendation from various nations in the southern seas, thanking you for stamping out pirates who were terrorizing the trade route."

As the king read a long list of my accomplishments, the commotion spread to the lesser nobles as well.

“I believe such achievements deserve more than the promotion to baron that was requested of me.”

No, I wouldn't say that.

“Therefore, I hereby promote Knight Satou Pendragon to viscount.”

Seriously...?

Without even waiting for a confirmation like Count Muno and Count Lessau had given, the king began his chant.

“**■■ Convert Peerage Roku Shaku.**”

As the chant ended, particles of light floated around me.

There was a different visual effect from the previous spells.

> Title Acquired: Shiga Kingdom Viscount

> Rank Acquired: Noble (Viscount)

The difference between a one-generation-only honorary hereditary-knight title and the upper rank of a permanent viscount was like a jump from a neighborhood association president to a member of parliament.

This unconventional four-step jump seemed to surprise the nobles, too. Upper-and lower-ranked nobles alike erupted into chatter, including a few pedigreed noble families cursing me out under their breath.

I understand your frustration, but take it to the king, not me.

Even I was surprised and confused about how my tentative promotion to an honorary baron or baronet had turned out like this.

While I fretted about it internally, Mr. Jelil was promoted from baronet to baron, and several other nobles received the title of permanent baronet or knight or succession of a family title.

Next was the promotion and peerage of one-generation honorary nobles.

An upper-ranked official received the title of honorary baron after years of hard work, while a silver-haired military officer became an honorary baronet.

Next, the mithril explorers who were honorary knights became honorary

baronets.

“Muno County, Pendragon family slave Liza.”

Liza was the first to be conferred with an honorary-knight rank, perhaps because she had defeated Mr. Juleburg in combat.

Clad in the knightly garb she’d chosen as her formal wear, Liza stepped forward stiffly.

“Liza of the Pendragon family, I hereby free you from slavery, endow you with the family name of Kishreshigarza, and grant you the title of honorary baronetess.”

...Honorary baronetess?

“ **Confer Peerage** Roku Shaku.”

The king’s chant ended, and Liza’s name changed to **Liza Kishreshigarza**, her last name being that of her clan. The title **Satou’s Slave** and the rank **Slave** also disappeared from her status in my AR display, replaced with the titles **Pendragon Family Vassal** and **Shiga Kingdom Baronetess** and the rank **Noble (Baronetess)**.

“Honorary Baronetess Liza Kishreshigarza, use your peerless spearmanship to defend the people.”

“As you wish, sire.”

Liza responded to the king’s words with the utmost politeness.

Our eyes met when she turned away, and I mouthed, *Congratulations*, to her with earnest pride.

Liza’s eyes crinkled with happiness, indicating that she’d received my message.

Next, Nana, Lulu, Arisa, Tama, and Pochi each received the title of Honorary Knight.

Arisa’s and Lulu’s ranks remained as Slave, however. We’d gotten special permission from the prime minister by way of Miss Nina’s appeal.

Once we were done resting and relaxing in the royal capital, my next plan was

to find a way to free the two from the Geist curse that bound them to the rank of Slave.

It was against the law of the elves for Mia to become a noble of another nation, so she declined her peerage.

This didn't seem to bother her, especially since just being an elf already got her noble-like treatment in most places. She was sitting alongside Arisa and the others with the same expression as always.

Once the promotions and conferences of peerage were done, they announced the nobles who were being demoted or losing peerage altogether.

Most of them were nobles who'd been involved with the demon-lord-worshipping cult Light of Freedom, but of course they hadn't found all the culprits from the incident just a day before. Instead of the red-ropes incident, the main focus was connected nobles I had helped expose as Nanashi the Hero.

Those nobles whose crimes were the gravest were charged with treason and sentenced to have their entire families punished.

Children under the age of ten were not executed but sent to a monastery at the foot of the Fujisan Mountains. As usual, the punishments in this world were incredibly severe.

I gathered from the gossip of the nobles around me that people connected to Parion Temple and Parion Province were being investigated in connection to the incident with the cardinal, as well as the Merkray family, whose names had come up in the investigation of the red-ropes incident.

Next was the medal conference ceremony, perhaps to lighten the heavy mood.

I received something called a Shiga Kingdom Dragon-Busting Medal for aiding Hayato the Hero in chasing the black dragon Hei Long out of Lumork Kingdom while we were staying in the Ougoch Duchy. I'd completely forgotten that I was going to receive medals and rewards, too.

After that, there were announcements about newly established offices, changes in high official posts, and so on.

The prime minister was taking an additional post as head of the new Ministry of Tourism.

This seemed to overlap with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs so much that I had to suspect it was established as a cover for some spy operation by the prime minister. I had better keep my distance, although the name of the department certainly intrigued me.

It was also announced that the three vacancies on the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga would be filled by the end of the month.

I thought I felt the prime minister's eyes on me during that announcement, but I'm sure I was just imagining it. He must have been looking at Mr. Jelil next to me, since he was a prime candidate for the Shiga Eight. Yes, that must be it.



"That was rather long, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, I'm kinda beat now."

After the ceremony, Count Muno headed to the salon with the other feudal lords, while my group and I moved to the hall where Lulu's coming-of-age ceremony would take place.

When we parted ways with Count Muno and the others, Miss Nina reminded me that I would have to attend the kingdom meeting starting tomorrow, since I had been promoted to viscount.

"Goodness, I was so shocked when they made you a viscount out of the blue, master! You should've told us beforehand."

"It was news to me, too."

It was probably intended as a nice surprise, but I would've appreciated a heads-up.

Maybe someone behind the scenes knew I would refuse if I was told ahead of time and had arranged it this way on purpose.

Well, what's done is done.

I probably can't change it now anyway.

As we walked down a hall that overlooked the entire royal capital, I saw a large image of the king being projected above the city.

“My beloved citizens...”

His voice boomed down from the heavens with salutations for the New Year.

The other nobles walking ahead of us all stopped and bowed their heads on the spot, so we followed suit.

According to the nobles chatting up ahead, this broadcast was not a function of the City Core but a magic device in the royal castle called a Kowhou Room. That Japanese-sounding name probably came from *kouhou*, the word for public relations.

After the New Year’s greeting concluded, the topic shifted to the incident from the day before. He explained that with the help of Nanashi the Hero, the sky dragon of the Fujisan Mountains that protects the Shiga Kingdom, and others, the demon army had been driven off. Finally, he wrapped up with a request for all citizens to work together to help restore the royal capital.

“All new adults, please line up here. Those with a letter of invitation and children of noble families, please proceed to the other side of the room.”

In the hall of the coming-of-age ceremony, several officials were calling out loudly to herd the plethora of new adults into lines.

“Where should I line up?” Lulu asked.

“Since you’re the head of the Watari knight family now, I think you can probably head to the noble kids’ side.”

The officials probably hadn’t made this part clear, since it was incredibly rare for the head of a noble family to be a young adult. Besides, if they were listed in the social register, they would most likely receive a letter of invitation anyway.

Lulu had become a brand-new noble after the invitations were sent out. I’m sure that’s why she didn’t get one.

“Sir Pendragon, congratulations on your promotion.”

“Thank you very much, Lady Reythel. Best wishes to you in the New Year.”

“I pray that you have a blessed year as well, dear.”

Right after I sent Lulu on her way, I ran into Reythel Ashinen, the wife of the viceroy of Celivera.

“Are you here for Sir Gerits’s coming-of-age, perhaps?” I asked, referring to their third son.

“Yes, that’s right. But good heavens, no sooner did we arrive than the city was plunged into chaos! I found myself wishing we had done an informal ceremony back in Labyrinth City like the Dyukeli family.”

“That must have been upsetting.”

The viceroy’s wife chuckled. “Why, you say that as if you weren’t there yourself.”

Her husband had stayed behind in Labyrinth City to officiate the coming-of-age ceremony there, she explained.

“Will you be returning to Labyrinth City after the ceremony?”

“No, I plan to stay for the auction.”

“Is there something you’re hoping to buy there?”

“Yes, I intend to purchase an elixir for Poputema.”

Now that was a name I hadn’t heard in a long time.

The former Count Poputema, a perpetually green-clad noble who always said “indeed,” had been controlled by a green greater demon to cause all kinds of trouble in Labyrinth City. However, he was also a trusted confidant of the viceroy and his wife, charged with much of the counterintelligence activities there.

As far as I knew, he was still hooked up to a magical life-preserving device in Labyrinth City to keep him alive in spite of the loss of his lower half in the disaster caused by the demonic Ludaman.

My greater magic potions could restore lost limbs, but it wouldn’t be safe to use them to heal Poputema, who had also lost part of his internal organs. The strain of that healing process could even kill someone of his age and fragility.

While I suspected the lesser elixirs I made might do the trick, I was hesitant to offer, since I didn't want them pressing me about where they came from.

"Look at that! So much for your *I can tell even from behind that she's a gorgeous babe* crap. She's a total uggo!"

"Well, everyone makes mistakes... Huh? Wait, she's a slave! What's a *slave* doing here?!"

"E-erm, well, I..."

"I don't wanna hear your excuses. Let's take her to the guards and make her master apologize."

My "Keen Hearing" skill caught some jerks picking on Lulu.

Uh-oh, she's in trouble.

"Excuse me for a moment."

With a quick bow to the viceroy's wife, I hurried over to Lulu on the other side of the crowd.

"You're gonna defend this lowlife?!"

By the time I got through the crowd, a few boys were already standing in front of Lulu.

"Don't get the wrong idea. I'm protecting you ignorant fools."

"Yeah, you heard him! Sir Gerits is right!"

It was the viceroy's third son, Gerits, and his friend Luram from Baron Tokey's family. I recognized the two other boys who hadn't spoken, too, although I couldn't remember their names. They were all part of Gerits's little group.

"Hang on, Barry. That's Sir Gerits, Viceroy Ashinen's son. We'd better not stir up trouble."

"Tch. Let's get outta here."

The rude young man scowled at his friend who'd whispered in his ear and stormed off.

"Wait up—you forgot to apologize to her."

“Yeah! You wanna get thrown like that demon?!”

Moving faster than his chubby frame suggested, Gerits and Luram cut the retreating boys off. Their training in Labyrinth City’s explorer school must be paying off.

“Thrown like a demon? Wait...is she the Maid Queen from the stories?!”

The rude boy’s eyes widened.

It seemed that Lulu’s new nickname and escapades were more famous than I thought.

“Shit, that’s not good. If she’s the Maid Queen, her master is the Untouchable. He’s a crazed berserker who attacked an intermediate demon without any armor!”

A crazed berserker? How rude. I should sue them for slander.

“S-sorry. I shouldn’t have insulted you.”

“Please don’t tell Mr. Untouchable about this!”

The boy and his friends bowed their heads to Lulu.

“U-um, I, ah...”

“If you accept their apology, just say, *I forgive you*,” one of Gerits’s friends helpfully explained to Lulu. “But if you’re still mad, you can challenge them to a duel.”

“A duel? With a slave?” The rude boy looked confused.

“You’re behind the times, I see,” the same helpful boy answered. “She was just granted peerage by His Majesty the king. Now she’s the head of the Watari knight family.”

“A duel?! Certainly not! ...I—I forgive you. Please, you don’t need to bow your heads.”

Once Lulu let them off the hook, the rude boys ran away.

“Sir Gerits and friends, you have my gratitude for helping Lulu out of a bind.”

I thanked Gerits and his hangers-on and gave Lulu the recognition-inhibiting

hairpiece she'd taken off to participate in the royal-audience ceremony.

"Don't worry ab— I mean, it was our pleasure, Viscount Pendragon. We still owe ya big-time, sir."

Gerits attempted to correct his manners partway through, although he didn't quite stick the landing.

"By the way, I haven't seen Princess Meetia and Miss Mary-Ann here."

"Mary-Ann's father said she had to go to the ceremony in Labyrinth City instead. Her Highness stayed behind to join her."

That explained why Baronet Dyukeli's daughter Mary-Ann and the cutesy young princess of Nolork Kingdom were nowhere to be seen.

Before long, it was time for the coming-of-age ceremony to begin. I headed to the family seats where the other girls were waiting.

The ceremony itself was similar to the traditional coming-of-age in Japan: The king and various ministers gave lengthy congratulatory speeches, and the children gave formal replies starting with the child whose parents ranked highest—in this case, Gerits.

Finally, the coming-of-age ceremony concluded with the kingdom anthem, and Lulu returned.

"I do sort of feel like an adult now," she said with a giggle.

"It looked like you were hitting it off with those noble girls," Arisa remarked. "What were you talking about?"

"The dress and accessories master made for me. Everyone loved them!"

Lulu beamed brightly.

I was happy to hear they were well received, since I put extra care into making sure they would live up to Lulu's gorgeous features.

I'd have to keep working hard to make accessories and clothes that drew out Lulu's natural beauty.

"There you are, Sir Pendragon."

Miss Helmina of the Shiga Eight emerged from the crowd.

Behind her, her fellow Shiga Eight member Mr. Heim gave me a light wave.

“Could you come with me for a minute?”

Now, where could they be dragging me off to first thing in the New Year...?



“Sir Pendragon!”

“It’s a pleasure to see you again, Sir Gouen.”

The two Shiga Eight swordsmen led me to a detached villa where Mr. Gouen was being confined; he was soon to be sent to the Azure Lands for his involvement in the attack of Duke Vistall.

“I wanted to thank you, Sir Pendragon. You saved me from killing my own master.”

Mr. Gouen held out his hand, and I shook it firmly.

“I want to thank you, too. I might never have seen my husband again were it not for your help.”

A small, slender young woman emerged from behind Mr. Gouen and gave me a faint smile.

Just barely in her twenties, she somehow looked young enough that I might have believed she was his daughter instead.

“Sherin, Merila, say thank you.”

“Yes, Mother. Thank you for saving our father, sir.”

“Thanks, mister.”

At their mother’s prompting, two grade-school-aged girls came out of hiding and curtsied to me, their faces bright red. Evidently, Gouen’s daughters were very shy.

“Thanks to you, I can spend time with my family until I go to the Azure Lands.”

Mr. Gouen’s elder daughter piped up at this. “Father, we want to come with you.”

“No can do, Sherin. The Azure Lands are a harsh environment. The sun beats

down on you, it's horribly humid, and there are plagues and poisonous insects. It's no place for little girls or your mother to live safely. Please try to understand."

Mr. Gouen looked bitter as he shook his head.

I was planning to improve living conditions in the Azure Lands, but I couldn't very well tell them that. Feeling guilty, I watched the family's exchange in silence.

"Then...I'll get stronger! Strong enough to support you and Mother."

Although Miss Sherin looked like her mother, her inner passion seemed to take after her father.

We spent some time with the Gouen family until the supervisor of the villa indicated that we should leave.



"So this is the *osechi* meal described in the legends of the ancestral king."

"Indeed. This is my first time eating it, but it is quite scrumptious."

After I met with Mr. Gouen and his family, I invited Miss Helmina and Mr. Heim over to our home, where we ate more *osechi* dishes.

"Mr. Heim, this roast beef is yummy, too, sir."

"The ham and the lobster, toooo?"

Pochi and Tama hovered at either side of Mr. Heim, offering him food.

"This Shiga sake is so smooth and delicious."

"Yes, it's a hundred-year-old Royal Sakura vintage."

Miss Helmina choked at my response, nearly doing a spit take.

"Don't serve that up so casually! A single cup of such choice sake is worth several hundred gold coins...!"

"This is what goes best with the *osechi*, though."

If it's delicious, that's all that matters.

"Sir Satou! We've arrived!"

“Oh-ho, if it isn’t Kirik’s daughter and Sir Heim!”

Marquis Lloyd and Count Hohen, the gourmet-loving nobles from the Ougoch Duchy, barged in ahead of the maid guiding them to the dining room.

“Welcome. Please have a seat over here. Your food will be ready shortly.”

Since the pair of them had provided invaluable *osechi* recipes, I’d saved them seats of honor.

“Sir Pendragon, congratulations on your promotion to viscount.”

Viscount Siemmen entered shortly after the gluttonous pair.

He was evidently here to congratulate me as well as to keep those two under control.

“Here. This is from Tolma, and this is from me.”

He handed me several novels that were all the rage in the old capital as a gift from Tolma, his brother and my friend, as well as an ancient scroll he said he’d found in the warehouse of his scroll workshop.

The scroll was labyrinth-made and somewhat damaged by time, but I should still be able to use it.

While I had him, I finally managed to order some scrolls I’d been meaning to get made—six that already existed and four of my own design.

“Miss Lulu, what might this dish be?”

“That one is called eggplant miso *dengaku*.”

“Why, it’s even more delicious than the *datemaki* we just had.”

“Hear, hear! The boiled dishes like the Ohmi beef *shigureni* and the whale *yamatoni* are delicious as well.”

The gourmet noble duo smacked their lips with delight as they talked cooking with Lulu.

Luckily, they didn’t ask where the whale meat came from.

I chatted with Viscount Siemmen and Miss Helmina as we enjoyed a lively feast to end New Year’s Day.

Hikaru

Satou here. Sometimes, your childhood memories can change over time without your even noticing. Then, when you reunite with a childhood friend years later, you're surprised to find that you each remember things a little differently.

"There aren't nearly as many carriages as yesterday."

"Mm, agreed."

Arisa and Mia gazed out the window as our carriage approached the royal castle once again.

Today, we were here on invitation from Princess Sistina. As usual, she sent the letter of summons that same morning, forcing us to get ready and leave in a hurry.

"That's because the only people using this road today are nobles participating in the kingdom meeting."

Since I had unexpectedly become a viscount at the royal-audience ceremony the day before, I was now required to attend the kingdom meeting as well.

I planned to deliver Arisa and Mia to Princess Sistina's room, then head straight to the assembly hall for the kingdom meeting, which took place from today to the fifth of the month.

PYWEEEE!

Off in the distance, we heard what sounded like the cry of a bird of prey.

"Mrrr? Eagle?"

"Perhaps the royal family has one as a pet?"

"It might just live in the branches of the Royal Sakura Tree."

As we chatted about this, the horses started whinnying frantically, and the

carriage swayed.

“Whoa!”

“Mrm!”

I caught the shrieking pair just as the carriage toppled sideways and slid off the road.

Since I cushioned them both with my telekinesis-like Magic Hand as well, no one was hurt—including me, too, of course.

“Arisa, Mia, are you all right?”

“Y-yeah...”

Arisa’s eyes came back into focus when I poked her cheek.

Mia was still sitting there dizzily, making a cute little “meep!” sound in response.

“Wh-what just happened?”

“Looks like the horses lost control, and the carriage fell over.”

I put the two girls down, pushed open the door that was now directly overhead, and peered around outside.

Several other carriages besides ours had veered off the road, while even more had flipped over or crashed into the shoulder.

“What in the world...?”

Not seeing any suspicious dots on my radar, I closed it and started to open my map instead.

Just then, something flew over the nearby grove with a whoosh.

PYWEEEE!

On the other side of the trees, I could see more carriages that had crashed, while the culprit circled overhead.

An eagle’s upper body and a lion’s lower body.

It was the ruler of the skies, that mythical beast—the gryphon.

In the handful of books I'd read that mentioned them, they all said the same thing: If you ever see one, run away.

PYWEEEE!

The gryphon screeched as it glared down at the ground.

"Gryphons are supposed to go *caw!*" Arisa bellowed.

She must have gotten that idea from some fantasy novel.

"...Hmm? Isn't that...?"

"Hey, look! Is someone riding on the gryphon's back?"

Arisa noticed at the same time I did.

Clinging to the gryphon's back was a woman with long black hair and white robes.

I used the "Telescopic Sight" skill to get a closer look.

"That idiot...!"

As soon as I realized who it was, I blurted out an insult.

"Master?"

"Arisa, once Mia wakes up, please take care of the carriage."

"Huh? W-wait!"

I used Return to teleport to the arbor of the royal castle, leaving a confused Arisa behind. There, I transformed into Nanashi the Hero and flew up toward the gryphon.

"Come on, Griffy! Settle down!"

As I approached the gryphon, my "Keen Hearing" skill picked up the cries of the girl clinging to its back.

"Mito!"

When I shouted her name, the gryphon gave a shriek and sent a wind blade toward me.

I dodged it with "Flashrunning" and used "Magic Power Armor" on my fist to

break the blade.

“Calm down!”

Hopping onto the gryphon’s back, I used my “Horseback Riding” and “Animal Training” skills to stop the beast’s thrashing.

“Y-you’re...Nanashi the Hero?”

Seeing her face up close, I was even more certain I recognized her as my childhood friend.

I thought she was carrying on her family shrine in the countryside of my old world. How could she have been summoned as a hero hundreds of years ago in the Saga Empire? Was the flow of time that different in a parallel world?

“Hikaru, it’s me.”

I removed my mask and the facial disguise I wore beneath it.

“I... Ichiroooooou!”

Mito’s eyes widened at the sight of my true face, and she exclaimed my real name.

Just as I thought, she really was my childhood friend Hikaru.



“Ichirou, Ichirou, Ichirooou...!”

Hikaru practically flew into my arms.

I embraced her dainty frame along with the torrent of emotions poured into the way she said my name.



Hikaru bawled like a little kid; I decided to pat her head and let her cry it out until she calmed down. After all, while it had been only a year for me, it had been far longer for her.

“We finally meet again!”

Hikaru looked up at me, her eyes puffy with tears.

She was older than the girl I remembered but still younger than I was before I came to this world.

Her real name was Mitsuko Takatsuki. “Hikaru” was a nickname based on one of the kanji in her first name; she’d chosen it herself when she was young, declaring that Mitsuko “wasn’t cool enough.”

“So the great deity was right.”

With that, Hikaru buried her face in my chest again.

“Deity? You mean the one that your family’s shrine was dedicated to?”

“Uh-huh, Ama-no-Mizuhana-hime. When I finished my role and Lady Parion was going to send me home, our shrine’s deity told me that I wouldn’t be able to see you if I went back to my old world.”

Instead, she explained that she had canceled her return home and taken the shrine deity’s advice, going into a magical cryo-sleep until the current era.

“Ama-no-Mizuhana-hime, huh...”

How I despise that name. The heavenly gods feared my power from another land, and thus they named me such that I would only be worshipped as a water god instead of a dragon god.

A memory from my youth flashed through my mind.

Hikaru had said that when we were children, leaning into the wind that blew down from the shrine.

At the time, I’d gotten a kick out of her impressive acting abilities. After hearing what she just told me, though, I couldn’t help but wonder if she really had been possessed by a deity at the time.

“Maybe she took pity on me because she was once separated from her

beloved by death, and she didn't want me to be parted from you, too."

"Did you know, little Ichirou?"

As Hikaru spoke, I remembered someone else's words, too.

"Ama-no-Mizuhana-hime, the deity of this shrine, once married a young human long ago. But because her lover was human, he died long before she did. Before he died, he made a promise to her. 'One day, I swear I will be reborn and return to you.' Isn't that romantic, dearie?"

I seem to remember this was an adult talking to me, probably Hikaru's mother or aunt.

"Do people really get reborn, though?" I'd asked at the time.

She'd told me it was true. *"But gods and humans have different life spans, so even if he was reborn, they would just be separated again."*

I remember she seemed sad as she spoke.

"Then why didn't she just make the person she likes into a god?" I asked.

"Even the gods cannot simply grant divinity to anyone they please."

I had forgotten about this conversation until now.

"Ichirou?"

Hikaru peered up into my face.

Whoops, I guess I got lost in memories.

"I'm going to take us elsewhere, Hikaru."

I saw some Wyvern Riders approaching from the royal capital, so I transported us along with the gryphon to the secret base I'd made in the monster territory.

Instead of Return, I used Unit Deployment. Though I'd promised Arisa I wouldn't abuse it, I couldn't bring the gryphon along anywhere I'd put a seal slate.

"Teleportation... No, it wasn't that spell, was it? I didn't feel the usual Space Magic sensation. Was that one of your Unique Skills?"

“Yep, that’s right.”

“You’re amazing as ever, Ichirou. The only power I have is to make lots of friends.”

Hikaru beamed at me.

“Oh, that’s right. Did things go okay at the office, Ichirou?”

After we moved and took another moment to celebrate our reunion, Hikaru brought up an unexpected topic.

“The office?”

What is she talking about?

“Since I got hero-summoned all of a sudden, I totally bailed on *FFL* in the middle of a death march, right? I always felt bad about that.”

“How do you know about *FFL*?”

That was the title of the game I had been finishing up before I came to this world, taking over for Junior, a newer worker who’d gone missing.

“What do you mean, *how*? Because I was the main programmer on that game, obviously?”

Hikaru blinked at me.

“No, that was Junior’s job...”

“Yeah. You know, me.”

Hikaru pointed at herself.

Unless I was going crazy, Junior was someone who liked *shojo* manga, definitely not Hikaru.

“Mr. Tubs started calling me that, remember? He misread my last name as *kouhai*, and when I pointed out his mistake, he got mad and said, ‘*Well, now your nickname is Junior!*’ Although I’m the one who gave him the nickname Mr. Tubs, so I guess we’re even.”

No, that was some girl from the sales department. If I remember right, he got all excited that a girl had given him a nickname for the first time and even went

around telling the rest of us to call him “Mr. Tubs,” too.

I relayed this to Hikaru.

“Huh? No, that was me, not a girl from sales. I remember Mr. Tubs getting excited about it.” Hikaru looked mystified. “You don’t remember? You trained me and everything.”

She looked like she was about to cry again.

“You were always telling me not to nest things for no reason, and not to use local variables for multiple purposes, and stuff like that.”

“Now that you mention it...”

The image of Hikaru working overnight at the office flashed across my mind.

“...No, that can’t be right.”

Junior and Hikaru were two different people. For a moment there, I almost let Hikaru’s insistence overwrite my memories with made-up ones.

I glanced over my log just to be safe but didn’t see any kind of Psychic Magic attack.

“Ichirou?”

Hikaru gazed at me anxiously.

Though we remembered things differently, she was definitely the same Hikaru I knew.

So why...?

In the back of my mind, I recalled the faces of the two Japanese people who had been summoned to Princess Menea’s home of Lumork Kingdom.

That’s right. They had been summoned from parallel versions of Japan, like the Great Island Empire Japan or the Southern Japan Federation.

In which case, the Hikaru in front of me now might be from a different Japan than the one I knew.

“...Hikaru, listen carefully.”

It pained me to say this to her after she was summoned as a Hero, founded

the Shiga Kingdom at the end of a terrible war with a demon lord, and waited half of eternity to be reunited with Ichirou Suzuki, but it didn't seem fair to just cover it up, either.

"What is it?"

"I'm...not your Ichirou."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I think I'm probably from a different Japan, a parallel world, than the Ichirou Suzuki you knew."

I proceeded to explain the inconsistencies between my memories and hers.

"B-but...that can't be!"

Hikaru sank to her knees and started to sob.

With no words of comfort to offer, all I could do was hold her tightly and gently caress her back.

Eventually, she fell asleep due to emotional exhaustion, and I carried her to the guest bed.

Looking at her grown-up face in profile brought someone else's face to mind.

At the same time, I remembered the conversation about Ama-no-Mizuhana-hime again.

"Do people really get reborn, though?"

"They do." I couldn't remember her expression when she said this. *"But just being reborn isn't enough. Gods and humans have different life spans. They would just be separated again."*

"Then why didn't she just make the person she likes into a god?"

"Even the gods cannot simply grant divinity to anyone they please."

This time, I remembered her sadly brushing aside a lock of her light-green hair.

"One person's soul isn't enough. You would need to intertwine many, many more..."

“Ama-no-Mizuhana-hime, the deity of this shrine, once married a young human long ago. But because her lover was human, he died long before she did. Before he died, he made a promise to her. ‘One day, I swear I will be reborn and return to you.’ Isn’t that romantic, dearie?”

I seem to remember this was an adult talking to me, probably Hikaru’s mother or aunt.

“Do people really get reborn, though?” I’d asked at the time.

She nodded, looking somber. *“But gods and humans have different life spans, so even if he was reborn, they would just be separated again.”*

I recalled feeling a little frightened by those words she had murmured at the end.



“Ichirou?”

Hikaru shot up in bed, crying out my name.

I’d brought her to a guest room at our royal capital mansion to sleep off her emotional exhaustion.

I freed the gryphon near the secret base, presumably to return to its nest. Arisa and Mia were spending time with Princess Sistina as planned, while I feigned illness to excuse myself from the first day of the kingdom meeting.

“Feeling better?”

“Ichirou!”

Hearing my voice, Hikaru’s face whipped toward me, then crumpled with sadness.

“Oh, so it wasn’t a dream...”

“Listen, Hikaru.”

I’d realized something while I watched over her sleeping form.

“What?”

“Did the deity tell you that you’d be able to meet your Ichirou Suzuki?”

“Uh-huh. She said, *‘If you want to be reunited with your beloved Ichirou, stay in that world.’*”

I thought so.

“That means that you wouldn’t be able to see the Ichirou Suzuki from your old world even if you went back to it, right?”

“Y-yeah, I think so.”

“Which means that the Ichirou Suzuki from your world might be in this world, too.”

The timeline didn’t make much sense, but I remembered reading a lot of sci-fi novels where time in parallel worlds didn’t pass at the same rate.

“You really think so...?”

I nodded firmly.

“So I don’t have to give up...”

Though there were still tears in her eyes, a smile finally returned to Hikaru’s face.

“If you’ve got nowhere to go, you can stay at my place.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course. Even if you’re from a different world, you’re still my treasured childhood friend as far as I’m concerned.”

“Ichirou... Wait, is it okay to keep calling you that?”

“Fine by me. You can call me whatever you like. Although I’m going by Satou here, so stick with that in front of other people, please. Should I call you Mito instead?”

“Nah, Hikaru is fine. Since I’ve always been called Yamato and Mito here, I think it’d be nice to be called by my name from Japan. Mitsuko is fine, too, but... Hikaru is better.”

“I’ll keep calling you Hikaru, then.”

“Kay...”

An awkward silence settled between us for a moment. But since Hikaru had a tendency to blurt things out like Arisa, these silences didn't last long.

"...Hey, why are you so young?!"

You only just noticed that now?



"Gosh, that sounds pretty crazy."

I was giving Hikaru a short summary of events from when I'd arrived in this world to becoming a noble.

I left out the parts about the Meteor Shower and the god-killing, since that might needlessly complicate things.

"So you weren't summoned as a Hero, then?"

"Yeah, according to the current Hero, it's possible I'm just a normal person who was summoned by the Lumork Kingdom."

"Hmm. The Lumork Kingdom, huh? The young pink-haired king there looked just like Shiga from *Teni X Hero* back in the day..."

Teni X Hero was a weird *shojo* manga that Junior was super into back when I was in Japan. It was about a blue-haired demon lord and a pink-haired hero who battled in tennis for some reason. I guess Hikaru was into the same series.

If I remembered correctly, though...

"Hikaru...did the name Yamato Shiga come from the protagonists of *Teni X Hero*?"

"Hee-hee, it's the first thing that came to mind! That's the name I always used in games."

I couldn't really judge, since my name here came from my gaming handle, too.

"But when you say my full name, say Shiga Yamato, please. The order is important."

She explained that she entered her name as Shiga Yamato but found when she analyzed herself that it came out as Yamato Shiga, much to her frustration.

Apparently, this distinction was very important to shipping fangirls.

“So what was it like for you when you came to this world, Hikaru?”

“Well, I was in a white room, and Lady Parion offered me a power. I told her I didn’t wanna fight and picked a power called **[Camaraderie]** that lets me become friends with anyone, and that must have made my soul’s capacity huge or something.”

In Hikaru’s list of abilities was a Unique Skill called **[Camaraderie]**.

That was a typical choice for her, since she always hated conflict.

“But because of that, the bigwigs treated me like a dud of a Hero and took my Holy Sword and Holy Tools away, and then they took advantage of my unlimited inventory to use me to transport supplies to the front lines and stuff like that.”

Evidently, there were three other Heroes in the Saga Empire besides Hikaru at the time.

“And then the airship I was getting ferried around on got taken down by a surprise attack from the Golden Lord, and I became the orcs’ prisoner... But don’t worry! I still saved my purity for my dear Ichirou.”

“I wasn’t worried about that.”

Oh, right, she doesn’t mean me. I bet the Ichirou from Hikaru’s world would say the same thing, though.

Although of course I was glad she wasn’t assaulted in that way.

The Golden Lord she mentioned was probably the demon lord I’d fought below the old capital, the Golden Boar Lord.

Hikaru went on to explain that she had used her **[Camaraderie]** Unique Skill to make the orcs her allies and even befriended the demon lord.

But that didn’t last for long: The demon lord used his Unique Skill in battle too much, and was overtaken by his God Fragment, and started a war with the two major powers at the time—the Flue Empire and the Saga Empire. Things went downhill quickly from there.

“A war, huh...?”

“Uh-huh. It was a terrible battle.”

Many demon lords and multiple heroes had fought in this frightful showdown.

The other heroes besides Hikaru lost their lives in that battle, the proud power of the Flue Empire fell, and the entire world was plunged into chaos, Hikaru went on.

Then Hikaru, freed from captivity in the Orc Empire, went to the Valley of Dragons, and acquired a sky-dragon partner and several Holy Weapons, and underwent the momentous task of eliminating demon lords.

However, Hikaru herself seemed to regret taking down foes like the Golden Boar Lord and the orcs, and she certainly didn't look proud.

“So you received that message from the deity after you defeated the demon lords?”

“Uh-huh, that's right. I chose to go home right away so I could get back to Ichirou, but on my way back to Japan, the deity of our shrine gave me a divine message...that I wouldn't be able to see Ichirou again in my old world...”

Hikaru trailed off there and looked me in the eye.

“Did you meet Ama-no-Mizuhana-hime?” I asked.

“No, not really. I just heard her voice... Or rather, I received a series of images that wasn't even fully formed into words.”

Hikaru had trusted those images and returned to the old capital.

It was after these events that she had founded the Shiga Kingdom with her friends and followers at the time.

“Boy, being a king was tough!”

Still, she managed to get some vassals and lords in order and set up the basis for what would become the Shiga Kingdom of today.

When the capital was relocated from the old capital to the current royal capital, she took that opportunity to appoint a new king and traveled around the world as Mito: righting wrongs, farming eternal-youth potions from

labyrinth treasure chests, and so on.

Then she received another divine message and set up a magical cryo-sleep chamber in a facility at the foot of the Fujisan Mountains, where she went into a long slumber.

It was only recently that she was awoken by Nana's sisters and someone named John.

Just then, I caught a glimpse of a purple wig.

Oh right, I forgot to apologize to her.

I explained how I'd made a disguise mask that looked like her face to serve as Nanashi the Hero's identity and how the king was still under the impression that I was the ancestral king Yamato. Then I made a proposal.

"If you want to see how your descendants are doing, you can borrow this wig and meet them as the reincarnation of the ancestral king Yamato."

"I told you, I protected my chastity! The second king was my *adopted* son. He was the illegitimate child of the last ruler of the Flue Empire. Such a good, hardworking kid, that Sharorik... He was always saying, '*I must do right by the Shiga name*' and so on."

He had the same name as the current third prince—no, I guess it was the other way around. The third prince must have inherited that name from the second king.

"...That's interesting, though. It might be fun to meet Sharorik's grandkid."

Hikaru smiled softly.

I produced an unused purple wig and a Nanashi costume from Storage and presented them to Hikaru.

"Oh, I'd better give this back, too."

Next, I pulled out the Holy Sword Claidheamh Soluis and drained it of my magic before giving it to Hikaru.

"Are you sure? It'll be really tough to beat a demon lord or greater demon without a Holy Sword, you know."

“It’s fine. I’ve got others.”

Not to mention my trump card, the Divine Blade.

“Don’t mind if I do, then.”

Hikaru gently recharged the Holy Sword and caressed its blade, whispering, “Welcome back.”

A blue light glimmered from the orb in its hilt, as if it was greeting Hikaru in response.



“Masterrr, your beloved Arisa is hooome— Ugh, you’re with *another* new woman!”

As Hikaru and I were having tea in the living room of my old capital mansion, Arisa barged in and glared at me like I was an unfaithful husband.

“Cheater.”

Mia entered behind Arisa, her eyes flashing.

“It’s not like that.”

“We’re hooome?”

“We’re back, sir— Oh no, stranger danger, sir!”

“Nyooo!”

Tama and Pochi showed up next.

“Ichirou—I mean, Satou, has your taste in women skewed a lot younger since you came to this world?”

“No, these girls are basically my family. I’m like their guardian.”

Hikaru still seemed to have me mixed up with the Ichirou from her world.

“An older woman with little-sister vibes? This is gonna be a tough one.”

Arisa didn’t react to the name Hikaru called me, probably assuming it was one of my many aliases.

“This is Hikaru. She’s my childhood friend...or something like that.”

“Something like that?”

“Yeah, technically she’s the childhood friend of a me from an alternate world.”

“Ooh, I see. Well, I’m Arisa. Nice to meet you!”

As soon as she heard the words *childhood friend*, Arisa strangely shifted into a more welcoming attitude.

“Mrrr?”

“Nothing to worry about. See, a childhood friend is...”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up on Arisa whispering a rude statement in Mia’s ear. “Someone who always loses.”

“Master, I have returned, I report.”

“My apologies for being unable to assist in defeating the gryphon, master.”

Nana and Liza entered the living room.

Arisa must have picked everyone else up on her way home from the royal castle.

“Whoa, a busty blonde and a cool beauty? So you still love older women after all, Satou.”

“I told you I’m younger now, remember? They’re both younger than I am.”

I guess her Ichirou had the same preferences as I did.

Finally, Lulu peeked in from the kitchen.

“Master, how many rice cakes should I make for the *ozouni* soup for lunch?”

“Wow! Where’d *this* vision of beauty come from?!”

Hikaru exclaimed in surprise at Lulu’s lovely face.

“U-um...”

“Lulu, this is Hikaru. She has the same sense of beauty as Arisa and I do, so she’s not saying that to tease you, I promise.”

I quickly reassured Lulu to clear up her distressed expression.

“O-oh, I see. My name is Lulu. It’s nice to meet you.”

“The pleasure’s all mine.”

Now that the gang was all here, I had everyone introduce themselves.

I figured I would tell Liza and Arisa later about how Hikaru was really the ancestral king Yamato and about my real name and such.

“So you’re waiting for your beloved to appear in the royal capital?”

“Uh-huh. Satou said I can stay here until then...but if that’s a problem, I can leave, of course.”

“Goodness, don’t be silly. Besides, we’re going back to Labyrinth City at the end of the month. It’s better for the maids’ long-term employment if someone still lives here.”

Besides, there were plenty of empty rooms in the mansion.

Soon, when Tama’s and Pochi’s tummy alarms started going off, we wrapped up the introductory chatter and moved to the dining room for lunch.

Since it was just us, I had the maids stop serving us once they’d set the table and sent them to eat in their dining room instead.

“Whoa, no way! It’s *osechi*!”

Hikaru shrieked delightedly when she saw the luxurious spread on the table.

“YumyyyyyyYYYYyyyyyyy!”

After just one bite of *kobumaki*, Hikaru let loose a cry worthy of a cooking manga.

“How is this even real? It’s like an explosion of *umami* in my mouth! The *gomame* and *datemaki* are sooo delicious, too!”

Tears streamed down Hikaru’s cheeks as she tasted one dish after another, from dried anchovies to rolled fish-paste omelets.

“I never thought I’d get to eat *osechi* dishes again. Thank you so much, Lulu!”

“O-oh, I didn’t do much...”

Lulu blushed at Hikaru’s high praise.

“Try this, toooo?”

“The whale *yamatoni* is yummy, too, sir.”

Tama offered up a piece of Ohmi roast beef, while Pochi recommended the boiled whale.

“Wow, you weren’t kidding! That really is good. I’ve never had whale in this world before. I didn’t know there were... Bwah?!”

Hikaru suddenly choked on a piece of whale.

“G-giant monster fish Tobkezerra?!”

Oh, right. Heroes always have highly advanced “Analyze” skills.

“I hunted it when it appeared in the sky over the old capital a while back.”

“Huh? I mean, I can see that you’re not lying, but... The giant monster fish? The symbol of terror, emissary of destruction, devourer of magic and breath attacks, scourge of the skies Tobkezerra...and you *hunted* it?”

Hikaru gaped at me, and I nodded.

“...Right, I guess you did say you’re that famous Hero—”

She stopped abruptly, looking at me with an expression that asked, *Should I not mention that?*

“It’s fine. They all know about it.”

“Gotcha... So you’re Nanashi the Hero, huh? I heard you defeated three whole Evil God’s Spawn without any help from the dragon god. Guess a giant monster fish would be no problem for you, then.”

Hikaru’s baffled expression shifted toward comprehension.

“That’s right, sir! Master is the strongest, sir!”

“You really love Satou, huh, little Pochi?”

“Yes, sir!”

Hikaru patted Pochi’s head, then blinked in surprise.

“...Wait, whaaat?! You’re over level 50?”

“Hee-hee, that’s right, sir.”

“We’re all over level 50, myself included,” Arisa declared.

“Mm. Worked hard.”

“Satou! I know little Mia here is an elf, but how old were these two animal-eared kids when you started letting them fight?”

Hikaru put her hands on her hips, looking like an angry big sister.

“Ten years old, maybe?”

“What? But if they’re eleven now—it was only a year ago?”

“A little less than a year, maybe?”

“Wh-what kind of crazy power-leveling did you do?”

“Aside from the very beginning, they fought all on their own.”

“N-no way...”

I’d helped by preparing hunting grounds for them, giving them good equipment, pulling away the most dangerous foes, and so on, but they did the rest by themselves.

“It’s true. Get a load of this OP staff.”

“It’s made of emerald... No, a clearbough from the World Tree? Looks like what the great sage of the Flue Empire used to have.”

“Pochi, could you show her your hidden weapon?”

“Yes, sir.”

“A Holy Sword from the gods... No, wait. I can only use Claidheamh Soluis, but I can still tell what an amazing Magic Sword this is.”

“No, that’s a Holy Sword.”

“A Holy Sword? Man-made Holy Weapons have come this far?!”

Hikaru exclaimed with surprise yet again.

“No, of course not. Our cheat-code master here made this sword himself.”

Arisa looked rather proud as she explained.

“Right, didn’t you make the Holy Sword Gjallarhorn, Hikaru?”

“Huh? No, I didn’t. I gathered the materials and helped the process a bit with Practical Magic, but it was mainly made by the Magic Swordsmith Lepu.”

Over the years, the story must have shifted from “the ancestral king helped” to “the ancestral king made it.”

Similarly, things that were supposedly inventions of the ancestral king like soy sauce and miso were developed not by the cooking-inept Hikaru but the hard work of an alchemist in her party who was in charge of the cooking.

As we exchanged such unexpected anecdotes, the tales of heroism and magic successfully broke the ice between Hikaru and the others.



“We got to the royal castle in no time, too.”

Hikaru and I, both dressed as Nanashi the Hero, arrived at the teleport point in the castle.

Together, we entered the king’s study through the office. Since I always visited at night, it felt strange to be there in the middle of the day.

“Hiya, Majesty.”

As soon as I addressed the king in Nanashi’s manner of speaking, Hikaru covered her mouth, desperately holding back laughter.

I had warned her in advance that I changed my attitude as Nanashi to keep my identity secret, but it seemed that it still struck her funny bone.

“Why, if it isn’t the anc... That is, Nanashi the Hero.”

“What an honor to have you visit us once again, O Great Hero. I see you have company with you today?”

The prime minister looked a little surprised when he noticed Hikaru, yet he didn’t press about who she was, perhaps assuming it was a body double or something.

“Uh-huh, he looks just like Sharorik, all right.”

“Do you know my son, perhaps?”

The king seemed to think Hikaru was referring to the third prince.

“Your son? Oh, no. But I’m glad he’s still remembered fondly enough for kids to be named after him.”

“Y-you can’t possibly mean...!”

The prime minister’s eyes widened as he realized which Sharorik Hikaru meant.

“And you look a lot like Rikky... Uh-huh, you’re a child of the Dux family. Good, so Litty followed my instructions and got married.”

Hikaru looked at the prime minister, the former Duke Dux, and crinkled her eyes fondly.

“Hey... Can I take this off?”

She pointed at her mask. I nodded.

“Sorry. Turns out I don’t wanna disguise myself in front of Sharorik and Litty’s descendants.”

With that, Hikaru removed her Nanashi the Hero mask and wig.

“You really are the great ancestral king! The legends say that Lord Littensol the First married the beautiful Eumina in order to fulfill a promise to the ancestral king!”

“Ah-ha-ha, so Eumi did win out in the end! I’m sure they built a very happy family together.”

Hikaru smiled a little tearily at the prime minister’s statement, clearly remembering an old friend.

“A-Ancestral King?”

“Uh-huh, that’s me. Thanks for taking care of the Shiga Kingdom so its people can flourish.”

At that, the king and prime minister dissolved into tears of gratitude.

“We must congratulate you on your return from eternal slumber.”

The two leaders bowed their heads.

I couldn't help feeling a little left out as I watched this exchange.

"S-so you were not the ancestral king, Lord Nanashi?"

"Nope. I kept telling you I wasn't, remember?"

The king and the prime minister looked stunned.

"Sorry if I kinda tricked you by mistake, though."

I figured I should apologize anyway.

"No need to apologize, Lord Nanashi. Were it not for you, the Shiga Kingdom would have fallen to the revived Golden Boar Lord or the Dogheaded Demon Lord."

"That is not all, either. Though the great sky dragon of the Fujisan Mountains assisted us against the demon army and the Evil God's Spawn just days ago, I doubt we could have fended them off without your heroic aid."

The pair was quick to sing my praises.

Finding out I wasn't the ancestral king didn't seem to have affected their attitude toward me.

"The Golden Boar Lord? A-and Doghead, too... You defeated that evil god?"

I nodded at the surprised Hikaru.

Come to think of it, while I had mentioned the day before that I defeated some revived demon lords, I guess I didn't specify which ones.

"You really are something, Ich— I mean, Nanashi."

Hikaru barely stopped herself from calling me Ichirou.

"So you are not a follower of the ancestral king?"

"No, no. He's kinda like my fiancé's sibling...or my childhood friend's older brother?"

"The fiancé of the ancestral king?! I can hardly believe my ears! Why, we must celebrate throughout the Shiga Kingdom!"

The king's reaction seemed a little off base.

"Ah-ha-ha, thanks. I got a divine message that we'll be reunited in the royal

capital, so I'll definitely come introduce you once that happens," Hikaru said lightly, then paused. "Wait...is it okay if I come visit even before then?"

"Most certainly. There is no door in all the Shiga Kingdom that would be closed to our great ancestral king."

Hikaru's smile widened at the king's words.

"In fact, now that you have returned, it would only be proper for me to abdicate the throne and return your rightful power to you."

"Huh? Wait, no! Hang on—you can't do that!"

Hikaru flew into a panic at the king's sudden declaration of intent to hand over the throne.

"But as the true king has returned, surely—"

"No, definitely not! I gave up the throne hundreds of years ago now! You can't rely on retired people forever. The future is in your hands!"

Hikaru insistently staved off the king's suggestion.

"Then please accept the title and mansion of Duke Mitsukuni, at the very least."

Ahhh, so her full alias was Mito Mitsukuni? Since Hikaru loved period dramas, I bet it came from Tokugawa Mitsukuni, who also went by the name Mito.

"But Mitsukuni Manor is in the district right in front of the castle, right? I don't wanna kick out whoever lives there."

She explained later that the family of Duke Mitsukuni was one she'd established after giving up the throne to the second king, made famous by her travels around the world.

"No, His Majesty Furaga the fourth king was the last to live there after his retirement. Ever since, it has belonged to the royal family without a soul living in it."

King Furaga was evidently the last to inherit the position of Duke Mitsukuni, too.

Something happened at the time that meant no one else carried on that

name.

“Of course, our servants have maintained it so that it is ready for use at any time. In addition to the building, the furnishings have been preserved with the Fixation spell. I have no doubt it will soothe your soul to see it, O Great Ancestral King.”

Hearing that it had been kept in the same state seemed to tug at Hikaru’s heartstrings, and she accepted the title and mansion without further protest.

After promising to visit again, Hikaru and I left the king’s office and visited Mitsukuni Manor at her request.

The guards and supervisor of the mansion let us in when she showed the signed letter from the king and a piece of the City Core that proved her position as Duke Mitsukuni.

“...Wow, it really is exactly the same.”

Hikaru gazed around the salon, eyes full of emotion.

“Sharorik and our friend used to hang out here all the time when they were worn out from work. That sofa there was everyone’s favorite. We’d complain to one another, talk about how to make the kingdom better, and goof around right here...”

Every inch of the enormous mansion seemed to be packed with memories.

I followed along with her from a respectful distance so I would neither intrude on her reminiscing nor make her feel alone.

“Hey, can I stay at your place for today, Ichirou? This place is a little too loaded with memories.”

“Yeah, of course.”

I used the Space Magic spell Return to bring Hikaru and myself back to my royal capital mansion.

Though she’d looked like a brooding beauty for a while, Hikaru was back to her usual self by the end of dinner, egged on by the smiles and chatter of my companions.

Nothing beats a smile if you ask me.

Prayer Ring

Satou here. I once included a ring that grants wishes in a long TRPG campaign. The story was that it would backfire if you wished for something too grand. I remember the players having a harder time deciding what to use it for than they did acquiring it.

“...This concludes the progress report.”

Once Hikaru and my companions went to bed, I went to the Echigoya Company disguised as Kuro.

After a report from Tifaleeza, the silver-haired managing secretary, the blond-haired manager, Eluterina, presented a few proposals.

“Advisor Arisa provided plans for a new paid-leave system and limitations on consecutive workdays.”

“Approved,” I said shortly when I heard the details.

In essence, Arisa had written up documents on how to reform the brutal labor conditions in the Shiga Kingdom. Wages were generally low in the Shiga Kingdom and based mostly on commission, which led to many employees refusing to take days off unless their employer made vacation days mandatory.

“Lord Kuro, we’ve received a request for assistance in the restoration of the royal capital from His Excellency the prime minister.”

“A request?”

“Yes, essentially an order for materials to be used for the restoration.”

Tifaleeza popped up behind Eluterina and handed me the documents.

The rate was solid, with a 50 percent increase over current market prices, but the turnaround time was fairly short.

“Very well. Tell them we’ll accept.”

“Lord Kuro, I have a concern, if I may...”

Miss Manager cautioned me that because building materials were currently being bought up en masse in the royal capital and its surrounding areas, it would be difficult to procure the requested amounts even with the 50 percent increase.

“Not a problem. I can order the materials from the Ougoch Duchy, Muno County, Kuhanou County, and so on.”

“But the delivery fees...”

“Manager, have you forgotten about my teleportation?”

The delivery would be easy if I did it myself.

Besides, if I purchased the supplies on-site, I could probably get them for around 30 percent of the going rate in the capital.

All I had to do was position merchants in those areas to secure building materials for me.

Once I finished these discussions, it was time to proceed with the main order of business for the day.

I explained that I wanted to cultivate and develop new farmlands and mines to help provide the poor with better jobs and wages, and I asked for their opinions.

“Since the royal capital and its sister city in Kelton have been struggling to provide for refugees from Lessau County, I imagine it’ll be possible to get permission for development and cultivation. However, it will eventually cost a great deal of money, and I worry that it would take many years to collect the funds needed to begin the project.”

“Profit is not a concern.”

Besides, I could do both with my magic at virtually no cost.

Though I supposed the mines would need drainage equipment, elevators, and so on.

“I’m looking at this area and this mountain as potential development sites.

Please calculate the number of villages and scale we would need based on the population of poor people and refugees.”

“Very well. Will three days be all right?”

You can do that in three days? I nodded at the reliable Tifaleeza.

“Come to think of it, you said you were collecting ideas from the townsfolk a while back, right? Did you get anything useful?”

The Echigoya Company had opened up a suggestion box for convenient items and product ideas at Arisa’s suggestion.

“I’m afraid there’s nothing we can immediately develop into a product at the moment.”

“Right, I guess it’s important to gather lots of ideas first. Keep at it.”

“Understood. Although...”

They showed me a few items that weren’t quite right for mass-produced sale but still rather interesting.

“Is this...a kindling tool?”

Though it was around the size of a bento box, it was unmistakably a lighter.

“I’m told it uses flint instead of a magic tool.”

“Why was this rejected as a product?”

“Each one would cost about one silver coin to produce. Since the royal capital is so close to Labyrinth City, basic fire-starting magic tools are widely available for one large copper coin. We’d never be able to sell such an expensive alternative.”

Ah, so it was a matter of production cost.

Fire-starting magic tools were easy to make cheaply, at least if you were not concerned about safety or convenience.

“Still, it’s a solid idea.”

“I agree. This is the inventor’s information.”

There was a familiar-looking name on the document: Aoi, the boy who was

summoned in Lumork Kingdom.

Since he was from an alternate Japan known as the Great Island Empire Japan, it made sense that he would have an idea of how lighters were made.

“I know he’s rather young, but could we perhaps invite him into the Echigoya Company’s research division?”

“Fine by me. I’m a little curious myself. I’d like to meet this Aoi fellow once we’ve hired him.”

I fiddled with the lighter and nodded at Eluterina.

If the young reincarnation wanted to make something, I’d be more than happy to help. Not to mention, if he wanted to develop something taboo like electricity or trains, I had to give him a warning.



“There’s something I’d like to tell you about the auction, Lord Kuro...”

Miss Manager approached me after the meeting.

Since the floormaster spoils would be sold at the auction, I was planning to participate as Satou.

“Now, this is unofficial information that I heard at the commerce guild on New Year’s Day...” Eluterina lowered her voice and continued. “But word is that there will be a Prayer Ring at the auction.”

“A Prayer Ring? I’m guessing that’s a ring imbued with the Holy Magic spell Prayer?”

“I don’t know the details, but I’m told it’s a treasured object of Parion Temple.”

Parion Temple...

The image of Cardinal Hozzunas from Parion Temple, the one who had summoned the Evil God’s Spawn, flashed across my mind.

“Did they mention why it’s being sold?”

“I was informed that the temple wishes to donate all the proceeds toward the restoration of the royal capital.”

Maybe this was some kind of deal between the kingdom and the temple because of the situation with the cardinal.

No, I guess if that was the case, they'd offer the Prayer Ring directly instead of the proceeds...

"Can anyone use this ring?"

If possible, I was hoping to win the bid and use it to free Arisa and Lulu from their Geist.

"Anyone who has been baptized at Parion Temple, since it is a Sacred Treasure of theirs."

Shoot, that won't work... Wait, since Hikaru was the Hero of Parion, surely she'd been baptized.

Even if not, I was pretty sure one of the Echigoya Company staff had been baptized at Parion Temple. I could just ask them to do it.

All right, then...

"We're going to win that auction."

For the sake of Arisa and Lulu.

I'd get that ring even if I had to drain my ridiculously excessive savings.

"Understood."

Miss Manager nodded without hesitation.

"I imagine many others will be bidding as well, including Duke Vistall, Duke Ougoch, and other well-off nobles. The wealthiest mercantile in the royal capital, the Ghookuts Company, is bound to bid on it, too. I would like to use a few products preferentially to keep those competitors in check, if possible. Would that be all right?"

"Sure. Will that help?"

"Before participating in the auction, one must submit an application with one's current available funds. So we can limit certain sales to cash only, with no credit option, and drain some of the nobles' and merchants' funds before the auction."

Ahhh, so we're trying to whittle away the enemy's strength before battle.

"If we're going to do this, let's do it thoroughly..."

I proposed a strategy of selling expensive items to anyone the wealthy nobles might borrow money from, too.

"Excellent. Could you, by any chance, supply us with more rune light gems and magic shield bracelets? It would be ideal if we could manufacture more magic potions, too..."

"Leave the restocks to me. Just give me a list of what kind of potions we need and how many."

"Manager, merchants aside, will the wealthiest nobles really spend that much of their fortune on ready-made products alone?"

Eluterina's brow furrowed as she contemplated Tifaleeza's question.

"Let's prepare some specially made Magic Swords and tools for the nobles, then."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Of course. Use them however you think is best, Manager. I can't provide airships or skypower engines due to a contract with the kingdom, though—sorry."

I could at least provide a few of the wooden Pegasi and Flying Shoes that I'd salvaged on the sugar route or found in the core room of the great desert.

"Lord Kuro, do you have a sample of these specially made Magic Swords? Or is it like a Champion's Sword with special abilities?"

The Champion's Sword was a kind of mithril-plated mass-produced Magic Sword that I sold wholesale to the kingdom through the Echigoya Company in order to improve defenses against monsters.

"No, it's different from those. I'll give you a few samples."

In the process of making Magic Swords and Holy Swords for the likes of Tama and Pochi, I'd made a few prototype swords with magical metal to test out the casting machines; I handed over those prototypes now. They were a far cry

from the secret weapons I made for my girls, but they were certainly far more powerful than the mass-produced Magic Swords. That should certainly work as bait.

“Lord Kuro, there are some wealthy families in which the missus holds the purse strings. Perhaps it would be best to offer some items those women might like, too, such as Heaven’s Teardrops and large pearls.”

“Good point. I’ll get some of the highest-quality Heaven’s Teardrops in Ishrallie. Would gems like this be useful, too?”

I showed them some gemstones I’d made with the Earth Magic spell Stone Object.

“Is this the work of Master Gemma?”

“You mean the Jewel Magic user?”

Miss Manager was close to the mark: I’d seen Master Gemma’s work in a museum and experimented to see if I could make something similar.

“But it certainly is amazing. As if the sun were sealed away in a precious stone...”

It was exactly like that, since I’d put a light stone inside a diamond.

I’d tried to model it after a brilliant cut, but since I didn’t have much knowledge about that sort of thing, Arisa and I put our heads together and came up with this after a lot of trial and error. According to her, this was an example of a method called the “round brilliant cut.”

Oh, right...

“Once we get permission to develop the mines and farms, let’s put out a call for investors.”

“Ah, so we make the deadline right before the auction begins and require cash investments only?”

Eluterina grinned as she correctly predicted my plan.

“Exactly. Let’s sap them dry as best we can. Except...”

“Require payment in gold coins only, so it won’t cause problems for the

livelihoods of the common people?”

This time, it was Tifaleeza who guessed what I was thinking. I nodded.

Leaving the rest in the pair’s capable hands, I returned to the royal capital mansion.

Interlude: Ripples

“A Prayer Ring?”

“What, you’re telling me the great Shadow Thief Sharururuun doesn’t know about such a treasure?”

In the fountain plaza, a bald man and a pretty small-town girl were conversing in whispers without looking at each other directly.

“Pippin! Don’t call me that in public.”

“C’mon, no one’s listening.”

Pippin waved off Sharururuun’s objection.

No one seemed to have noticed anyway. Their voices were masked by the sounds of the fountain, and they were both using “Ventriloquism” to speak without moving their lips.

“So what’s the story with this ring?”

“It’s a Sacred Treasure they were keeping hidden away in Parion Temple. Word is it’ll be on the auction block.”

Sharururuun remembered the rumor that Parion Temple had been involved in the chaos at the end of the year.

It made sense to her that they might have to give up one of their treasures as a result.

“And what about it? Surely you don’t wanna team up?”

“Heh, and if I said I did?”

Sharururuun’s eyebrows furrowed a little. “You, Pippin the Phantom? I wouldn’t believe it.”

“You give me far too much credit, madam,” Pippin said jokingly. “We might not stand a chance when it’s within the multilayered barriers of Parion

Temple...but when it's being transported to the auction house or during the sale, I'll bet you could steal it easily, right?"

"Of course. That's why they call me the Shadow Thief."

Sharururuun stole a glance at Pippin's face.

Noticing her, the man smirked.

"It's being kept in the Dragonseal Chest, the one they say could trap even a dragon."

"I'm amazed you know about all this..."

"Just one of my many talents."

"Yeah, sure. So what's the deal with the box?"

Knowing Pippin wouldn't disclose his sources, Sharururuun pressed him to go on with the more important details.

"The Dragonseal Chest can't be opened unless you know the proper sequence. If you try to break into it, the ring inside will vanish into another dimension."

"You really think I'd be able to open a box like that?"

Sharururuun nipped that in the bud. She had confidence in her lock-picking and magic trap-disarming abilities, but even she didn't think she could open some legendary treasure chest that could seal a dragon.

"Of course not. There's this thing called the Dragon's Eye, see. They say you can use it to figure out the proper sequence to open the Dragonseal Chest."

"Isn't that a royal treasure of some kingdom or other? What, you want me to go all the way there to get it?"

Pippin's eyes twinkled mischievously at the girl's reluctant frown.

"No need. As it happens, the Dragon's Eye is in this very city right now."

Knowing Pippin, Sharururuun was able to easily guess what came next. "What, the castle?"

"Heh-heh. See, this is why you're my rival."

“Well, that’s the only place the Phantom can’t get into, right?”

“It’s not that I *can’t*,” Pippin huffed. “I’d just be found out right away.”

“So you want me to go in and get it, huh?”

Pippin nodded confirmation.

“If you’re gonna send me running around like an errand girl, I’m assuming you’ve got a reward to make it worth my while, yeah?”

“Of course. I’ll get you elixirs, magic jewels made by Master Gemma, whatever you’d like.”

“I don’t need either of those. All I ask is for you to help me out with a job in return. It’s simple, really, just retrieving one person from an ever-so-slightly dangerous place. Should be a piece of cake for you, right?”

“Certainly. I’ll go to a demon lord cult’s base, a labyrinth, whatever you want.”

The pair exchanged the underground gesture for establishing a contract.

“Still, you have an awful lot of information. Did you know all this in advance?”

“Yeah, I happened to find out about it ten years ago now. I’ve been waiting for it to leave the temple ever since.”

“Uh-huh, right.”

Sharururuun sensed a darker past behind Pippin’s words, but she didn’t push him about it.

“All right, I’m counting on you to get that Dragon’s Eye. Before the auction begins, please.”

With that, Pippin abruptly vanished from her side.

“Please, eh? Not a word I’ve heard from him before.”

With that, Sharururuun peeled off her pretty-girl mask, her plain features vanishing into the crowd.



While the thieves were setting their plot into motion, the nobles and merchants had begun to make their moves as well.

In one duke's home...

"A Prayer Ring...what a troublesome item."

"Troublesome, sir?"

His right-hand man looked at the head of the family inquisitively.

"Indeed. If it falls into enemy hands, they may very well use it for ill, and yet, we would have little use for it if we acquire it ourselves."

"Are you quite certain, sir? In my humble opinion, it is an excellent item for healing incurable illnesses, lifting curses, avoiding an accidental death, and so on and so forth."

"Hmph, keeping a cure-all or an elixir on hand is plenty for the likes of illnesses and curses. Even death can be dealt with if one bargains with the right temple. A ring that grants wishes if one prays to the gods is too much power for human hands."

The lord sighed.

"Then we shan't be making a move to bid on it, sir?"

"...Alas, we cannot ignore it. It would be too dangerous if it falls into the hands of those fools in the west or some other riffraff. If only His Majesty takes an interest, then there will be little to worry about..."

With another sigh, the lord ordered his right-hand man to make preparations for bidding.

Meanwhile, in yet another duke's home...

"A Prayer Ring, you say! We must win it, no matter what it takes!"

"But, sir, we have already spent the emergency funds of our royal capital manor on military action. And it would be quite difficult to have more transported in from our hometown..."

The duke's aide cautioned his frothing master.

"Grrr... At this rate, it will fall to that old bastard in the east." He scowled and muttered, "We must prevent that much at the very least..."

The aide watched quietly as the duke began plotting away.

“I simply must have it! I shall prove to the world that ours is the greatest company in the royal capital!”

An elderly merchant, wizened as a dead tree, slammed his hands on a heavy desk.

This old mercantile was one of the very top competitors in the royal capital.

“B-but, Grandfather... Such a valuable item is sure to catch the eyes of the pedigreed nobles—no, perhaps even His Majesty the king will bid on it, will he not?”

“Harrumph! Have you knotholes for eyes, boy? The kingdom has only just built several massive airships, to say nothing of the recent demon attacks. There can only be so much wealth remaining in the royal treasure troves. No, the real problem is the feudal lords and viceroys...”

The old merchant sneered.

“...But the lords are of no consequence. Duke Ougoch suffered a demon lord revival and an attack from the giant monster fish Tobkezerra. Never mind Duke Vistall, under threat of civil war from his own son. Marquis Ganika is beset by pirates and monsters, and Marquis Eluette is too reliable to go after such a thing. Some of the counts might try for it, but their assets in the royal capital will be far more limited than in their own realms.”

The merchant’s grandson nodded meekly.

“Few of the pedigreed nobles have enough cash on hand to compete. But we mustn’t discount the viceroys, especially Marquis Ashinen from Labyrinth City and Count Hohen from the trade city. We must prepare art that might catch the eye of Ashinen and jewelry that will interest Hohen’s wife so that we can deplete their might.”

“As you wish, Grandfather. Allow me to make arrangements for the jewelry. No doubt Uncle can find suitable works of art.”

“Indeed. Remember to make payments cash-only, not credit.”

“...Yes, of course.”

The grandson hesitated for only a moment to respond to this difficult last

request.

Higher-ranking nobles tended to prefer buying on credit, essentially putting it on a tab; it was usually difficult to get payment from them until the following month.

“Heh-heh-heh. Now our company name will finally shine at the top of the royal capital. We won’t be compared with that stubborn oaf or the damn weasels anymore.”

The old merchant’s cackle echoed in the presidential office.

However, not all of the other companies had taken interest.

“A Prayer Ring? Leave that for the nobles and merchants who can’t see past their next move.”

This president glared coolly at the grandchild who had come running to make a breathless report.

“It’s far more useful to acquire elixirs and Champion’s Swords.”

“Will there be Champion’s Swords at the auction?”

The magic Champion’s Swords that the Echigoya Company sold wholesale to the kingdom were extremely popular among knights and military nobles. However, supplies couldn’t keep up with the demand, and nobles who got their hands on one would never part with it, driving many to seek out resales at outrageous prices.

“Yes, a few, but they’re also offering to sell them at any quantity for three hundred and fifty gold coins exclusively for cash buyers.”

“Three hundred and fifty?!”

Ordinary mithril-alloy swords went for around 120 gold coins, and even labyrinth-made Magic Swords ranged from 200 to 300 on average. This seemed an absurdly high price by comparison.

“At the very least, it seems they’ll sell us four hundred, perhaps even five if we make a compelling case.”

“B-but if the Echigoya Company sells these directly to nobles...”

“I’m sure they would not approach our company in the first place if they intended to do such a thing. That company seems to highly value fair relationships with fellow merchants, being the auspices of a Hero and all. Even if they were to jump the gun on us, they would never do anything to prompt people to talk behind their backs.”

The grandson fell into unhappy silence, looking unconvinced.

“Still hung up on the ring, are we?”

The president sighed inwardly at his grandson, who couldn’t even disguise his expression.

“Even if we were to acquire the ring, what then? We’d only end up selling it off to someone else. Rather than form a single debt of gratitude from someone with one ring, it’s far more advantageous for us to use the Magic Swords to build relationships with many military factions and high-class nobles.”

The grandson’s eyes widened at this remonstration.

“If you are to carry on this company someday, you must always be several moves ahead. No successor of mine would be fooled by the promise of instant profits.”

“...Of course. I must study more diligently.”

His grandson nodded sheepishly, and the president seemed pleased.

“Sheshesheh, seems rumors of a happy little ring are going about, eh?”

At a weaselfolk merchant company, the president and his confidant were also discussing the Prayer Ring.

“They say it can grant any wish. Quite fascinating, indeed...”

“But I believe it would be more profitable for the company to bid on Magic Swords or self-defense tools. Rumor has it that there will be Champion’s Swords on the auction block, too.”

Being from another nation, these merchants couldn’t acquire a Champion’s Sword through any standard means.

Since the knights and nobles who acquired them would never let them go,

bidding on them at the auction was their only option.

“Sheshesheh, I know that, of course. The ring will no doubt be the last item at the auction. It would be foolish to give in to greed at the cost of the company’s profits.

“Money must be used wisely,” he added with a shrewd smile.



“What is His Majesty thinking?!”

In a room of the royal castle, the opulently clad first prince was flying into a rage.

His servants held their breath in fear of the prince’s disfavor.

“How can he not realize that leaving a dangerous object like a Prayer Ring to chance is tantamount to putting the kingdom itself in peril?!”

“Y-Your Highness, I am sure His Majesty has his reasons...”

The pale-faced first wife of the king timidly attempted to pacify the prince.

Though he was first in line to the throne, it was still disrespectful to openly question the king’s judgment. The servants in this room were all deeply loyal and had served the family for many years, but if this information were somehow to get out, it could easily give the other heirs leverage to make their own case.

“I know that much, obviously. But right now, His Majesty...”

...is being fooled by a charlatan who claims to be the ancestral king Yamato.

The prince kept this thought to himself, as the return of the ancestral king was a secret known only to the king and certain royals and statesmen.

“...As if any human who isn’t undead could sleep for hundreds of years.”

“Your Highness?”

The queen looked worriedly at the muttering prince.

“It’s nothing. If His Majesty will not act, then I will. For all we know, some scoundrels might come up with a nasty plot to try to steal the throne.”

With that, the prince thought of the nobles in his own faction.

The king's first wife slipped out of the room with all but the bare minimum of servants to leave the prince to his thoughts uninterrupted.

Even those in high places had their own troubles to attend to, it seemed.

Friendship and Determination

Satou here. Since the development of the web, I feel like we're less likely to call family and friends on the phone to make sure they're safe when there's news of a disaster in their area. Social media is a lot faster and usually more reliable.

It was the third day of the year, one day after I'd invited Hikaru to the manor.

I was attending day two of the kingdom meeting.

"We will present one of the small airships we are currently building to each land's lord. We'll also be adding two new large airships for a total of four. One of the new ships shall travel the northern route between Seiryuu City and the royal capital, while the other will travel the circular route around each major nation."

When the prime minister made this declaration, cheers arose from the nobles gathered in the assembly hall.

Seated in the room were the king, the feudal lords, upper nobles including myself, and the cabinet ministers and other high-ranking bureaucrats.

I was positioned with Miss Nina behind Count Muno as a part of his entourage.

"The northern-route ship will go into service in three months' time, while the loop route will take half a year. These new additions will surely enliven the exchange of people and goods within our great kingdom."

Next, he announced that the new skypower engines for these airships had been provided by Nanashi the Hero.

Half the small airships and the large airship for the northern route were being built at the royal shipyard, while the other half and repairs on the loop-route large airship were at the Echigoya Company shipyard.

The airship designated for the loop route was the one we were taking from Labyrinth City to the royal capital when it made an emergency landing nearby.

“As the small airships are completed, they will be distributed in the following order.”

The currently serviced eastern route connected Ougoch Duchy, Ganika Marquisate, and the royal capital; the western route was between Vistall Duchy, Eluette Marquisate, and Labyrinth City Celivera.

The newly established northern route would make a direct connection between the royal capital and Seiryuu County, where a labyrinth had recently appeared.

As such, small airships would be distributed to all feudal lords except the two aforementioned dukes, two marquises, and Count Seiryuu. The order of this distribution was determined by the amount of money each nation contributed to the kingdom.

“So we’re last...”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up on a bitter grumble from the young lord of Lessau County.

It probably didn’t help that they had recently lost their capital and previous lord to a surprise attack from an intermediate demon, along with a third of the population and most of the statesmen. To make matters worse, they were only halfway done exterminating the monster army the demon had gathered, sending so many refugees to the royal capital and nearby territories that it was beginning to cause difficulties.

Since the former Count Lessau had made Tifaleeza and Neru into criminal slaves for a disgusting reason, though, I couldn’t quite bring myself to sympathize with this Count Lessau.

“Next, we will announce distribution numbers of the cores from labyrinths to each nation.”

The allocation of resources seemed like it would cause all kinds of quarrels, but no one complained or objected as the prime minister read out the numbers; maybe they’d already done their negotiating in advance.

...No, wait, one person was voicing an objection.

“Cutting off supplies to our territory for a year?! This is outrageous! We will never be able to rebuild in such conditions!”

It was the same young lord from before.

Count Lessau looked desperate as he pleaded with the king and prime minister.

I didn't know how they would use cores for rebuilding, but he was clearly unhappy that they'd decided to redistribute what would have been his county's cores to the knights being dispatched to Vistall Duchy and the quickly recovering Muno County.

Come to think of it, Miss Nina did tell me that before the attack, the previous Count Lessau had not only failed to garner support from his fellow lords and nobles before the kingdom meeting, he even incurred animosity from many of them.

I imagine that's how his successor wound up getting left out now.

The crafty adults wheedled the young Count Lessau back into his seat, and the meeting moved on to the next topics.

This included the rebuilding of the royal capital, for which the Echigoya Company had been enlisted to provide materials; discussion about how to deal with the rebellion in Vistall Duchy; and finally, Count Seiryuu discussed when the newly made Seiryuu City labyrinth would begin development in earnest and requested investments.

Most of the topics required little more than fact-checking and didn't take up much of the meeting time. The nobles seemed to have already laid groundwork and negotiated about these things before the end of the year.

The meeting went on with a short lunch break, and by the time the attending nobles started to look weary, the end was in sight.

“...This concludes today's kingdom meeting. If anyone has objections to the matters discussed today, please rise.”

The prime minister, who was running the meeting, wrapped things up with

the traditional closing remarks.

I'd heard that no one had raised an objection at this point in the past thirty years.

At least, until the young man seated among the feudal lords stood up from his seat.

"Young master, please take your seat!"

"Let go of me. Do you want our people to go on suffering?"

Roughly shaking off the aide who quietly pleaded with him to sit down, the young lord glared at the prime minister.

"Count Lessau, is it? State your objection, then."

The intimidating baritone of the prime minister's voice made the young count tremble.

"Th-then state it I shall. P-please reconsider the distribution of cores to our territory!"

Though he wore a determined expression, the tremor in his voice lessened the impact somewhat.

"I believe we reached a consensus on that matter in this morning's meeting."

The prime minister enunciated each word sharply as he addressed the count.

Count Lessau looked dissatisfied, clamping his mouth shut and lowering his gaze.

Incidentally, the cores in question were an essential material for constructing magic tools, brewing potions, fueling the magic furnaces found in mines and teleport points, and so on. However, I wouldn't say they were essential to people's everyday lives.

Within a city, all the necessary magic power was drawn from a mana source by the City Core.

Unless it had a magic device like the mithril furnace in Bolehart City that consumed magic power like water, a city shouldn't need a large amount of cores.

On top of that, the ones being distributed in this case were just from Labyrinth City. Cores harvested from monsters in each territory were left up to that lord's discretion.

If they didn't have enough, they could just hunt monsters within their own territory.

Although that worked only if you had enough of an army, of course.

"...What your territory needs is restoration of public safety, correct? The cores that were intended for your county will instead be given to the kingdom knights being sent to Vistall Duchy for the furnaces that run their teleport points, and in exchange, the knights will assist in exterminating the monsters infesting your county to restore safety to the major roads. You agreed to this plan as well, did you not?"

"W-well, I..."

Ahhh, now I can sort of guess the prime minister's motives.

The prime minister's top priority must be securing the safety of the major roads through Lessau County.

And on Count Lessau's dime, no less.

Geographically speaking, if the central roads through Lessau County weren't safe, the supply lines to the knights suppressing the rebellion in Vistall Duchy would be compromised. They would have to pass through the hilly roads of Eluette Marquisate to the west instead.

Besides, if the central roads weren't secure, it would affect trade between the royal capital and the northern parts of the kingdom.

This was just my assessment from a military and economic viewpoint, but I was willing to bet I was right.

And apparently, Count Lessau was the only person who didn't realize this.

"Hmph, he says he wants to restore his territory, but I bet he's just trying to get his mines running again to make a profit."

Count Zetts grumbled this loudly for everyone to hear.

Judging by the scowl on Count Lessau's face, it must have hit the bull's-eye.

"Old Man Zetts can be so immature," Nina muttered next to me.

She told me that Zetts County was next to Lessau County and was probably disgruntled about the inconveniences they were causing. Then she explained Count Lessau's scheme, too.

"He's probably right about what the kid is planning, though. I imagine he'd like his family and retainers to profit and to get a leg up on the other nobles in his territory."

"As I have said before, sending the knights to eliminate monsters along the roads is sure to have a bigger impact on the county's restoration than providing magic cores. What use would it be to provide cores to your mines and furnaces without securing the safety of your people?"

Ignoring Count Zetts, the prime minister addressed Count Lessau in a gentle yet reproachful tone.

"Then my territory can lend you our cores instead..."

Count Lessau perked up hopefully at this, but his face clouded again when he saw who was speaking.

It was none other than Duke Vistall.

"...and in exchange, the knights can pass straight through your county and prioritize suppressing the rebellion in ours."

"B-but..."

"What's the problem? I'm offering you the cores you wanted!"

Count Lessau quaked at Duke Vistall's bellow of rage.

His vassals and some of the pedigreed nobles followed suit, jeering and yelling.

"That's enough, Vistall—"

The prime minister stepped in to admonish Duke Vistall and his hangers-on.

Evidently, the kingdom meeting wasn't ending anytime soon.

Great. Just great.



“...Hmm?”

After parting ways with Count Muno and company in the royal castle, I was in a carriage heading down the main street toward our royal capital manor when I noticed a blue dot on my zoomed-in radar.

At first, I thought it was one of my party members, but I was wrong.

Leaning out the window, I saw a glimpse of sunny blond hair.

It was someone I thought was in Labyrinth City:

“Zena!”

I hopped down from the carriage and waved.

Spotting me from afar, Zena pressed her horse’s reins into the hands of a nearby colleague and came running over.

“S-Satou! I...I’m so glad you’re safe...”

As soon as she reached me, she threw her arms around me at full force.

Her hands trembled as she held me tightly, repeating, “Thank goodness...,” with tears in her eyes.

I was guessing she had heard about the appearance of the Evil God’s Spawn and the demon army in the royal capital and came here out of concern for our safety.

“Thank you, Miss Zena. Please don’t worry—none of the girls are hurt, either.”

“Thank goodness,” Zena whispered one more time, then smiled through her tears.

“You there, girl!” I heard a booming voice behind us. “You’re Baronet Alfe’s niece, aren’t you?”

“Y-Your Excellency Kigorri!”

It was the lovely swordsman Iona from Zena’s squad who responded to the

voice.

Turning around, I saw Sir Kigorri, who was Count Seiryuu's guard, and Viscount Belton, both peering out from a carriage.

"Sir Pendragon? And if it isn't the magic soldier Zena."

Noticing Viscount Belton's curious gaze, Zena hurriedly let go of me and jumped away.

"What are you doing in the royal capital? I thought your squad was on a mission in Labyrinth City."

"W-well, I...", Zena stammered.

She must have been so worried about me that she came without getting permission.

"She heard of the commotion in the royal capital a few days ago and rode on horseback to make sure that her lord His Excellency Count Seiryuu was safe and sound."

I used my "Fabrication" skill to come up with a generic excuse on her behalf.

"Sorry for calling out to you when you were on a mission," I added to Zena, deliberately giving the impression that it was my fault she had stopped here.

"Ah, is that right? Fear not—His Excellency is safe. As one of his chief vassals, I am pleased to hear of your loyalty."

Viscount Belton inclined his head toward Zena and her squad.

Another victory for the "Fabrication" skill.

"I should like to bring you to see him at once, but unfortunately, he cannot leave the royal castle at the moment. I'm afraid the only person at his royal capital manor currently is that uptight Sir Torriel. I'd advise killing time until the evening if you do not wish to stand on ceremony all day."

With that, Viscount Belton's carriage went on its way.

Judging by the slight smile at the corners of his lips, I think that was his way of giving Zena and the others a little break.

I brought them all back with me to our royal capital manor.

“You must be exhausted. I’ll have a bath and a room prepared for you to relax.”

I gave the maids instructions to ready a guest suite and put my coachman in charge of Zena’s squad’s horses.

“I heard there was a great deal of damage along the main road, but this area seems relatively unharmed.”

“Yes, we were very fortunate.”

I guided the four to the parlor as I answered Miss Iona.

“What, did a demon lord show up?”

“No, just a demon army and a great deal of monsters.”

“A demon army?!”

When I responded to Lilio’s joke with the honest truth, Zena jumped up in surprise from her seat next to me, nearly spilling the fruit-infused water she was drinking.

“Yes, but there’s no need to worry. Sir Nanashi the Hero and his attendants defeated them all. There was nothing for the rest of us to do, really.”

“Oh, good...”

According to Zena’s squad members, it was a total coincidence that they’d heard about the hubbub in the royal capital at all.

They happened to be at the explorers’ guild when they heard the guildmaster exclaim, “The royal capital’s been attacked by demons?!”

Right after that, the sky grew dark in the middle of the day, and Zena was so worried that she ran out of the guild to go to the royal capital.

“Man, you have no idea how hard it was to stop Zenacchi from trying to use magic to run all the way there.”

“L-Lilio, honestly! I told you to keep that a secret!”

The Wind Magic spell Wind Walk certainly was faster than a horse, but it was so hard on the user’s muscles that it wasn’t suited for running marathon-like distances.

“We left as soon as we got permission from Sir Hence under the pretext of investigating the strange events in the royal capital, but...”

“Between the crowded roads, getting delayed at the Vanwing Pass checkpoint, and the gates to all the towns and cities being closed, it took us three whole days to get here.”

Miss Iona and Miss Lou elaborated on their journey.

I had to be grateful to Zena for going through all that just to come check on me.

“I smell master, sir!”

With a gleeful cry, Pochi came jumping in through the window facing the garden.

As soon as she realized I had guests, her face turned to an expression of panic but then cleared into a smile when she saw who was with me.

“Zena, sir!”

“Good to see yaaa...?”

Tama peeked in the window next to Pochi.

“I say, has Satou returned?”

For some reason, Karina poked her head in between the pair, her golden ringlets and magical bust alike bouncing.

“Geh, you’re living with some lady in the royal capital, too?”

“You better watch out, Zena. At this rate, some other girl’s gonna beat you to the punch.”

While Lilio accused me, Lou whispered something strange to Zena.

“I only came to visit Satou since I heard from Nina that he wasn’t feeling well, you see.”

“You did? Thanks for going out of your way to check on me, Lady Karina.”

Miss Nina knew for a fact that my illness was an excuse to get out of the kingdom meeting, so she must have told Miss Karina that to give her a chance

to get closer to me.

“You’re sick, boy-o?”

“A-are you all right?!”

“I’m fine. I was just a little under the weather yesterday.”

Off to the side, Iona scolded Lilio to call me “Sir Knight” instead of “boy-o.”

The head maid knocked at the door, then frowned in consternation when she saw Miss Karina peeking in through the window.

She had probably come to tell me that Karina was visiting, only to find that she was already here.

“U-urgent news!”

Another maid flew into the room from behind the head maid.

“What is it? You’re in front of the young master and his guests, you know.”

“I-I’m sorry. B-but, but it really is urgent!”

As the maid repeated herself frantically, I handed her an untouched glass of fruit water to calm her down.

“Her Highness the princess is here!”

“You mean Princess Sistina?”

Although it could be Princess Menea from the Lumork Kingdom, I thought.

“H-Her Highness?!”

“Princess? As in the daughter of the king?”

“Now there’s royal competition, too?”

Zena’s squad seemed to be oddly panicked.

I would’ve thought they were used to it, since they’d interacted with Princess Meetia from the Nolork Kingdom at the explorers’ school in Labyrinth City, but I guess not.

“Oh dear, did you already have visitors? I’m terribly sorry.”

Her trademark glasses glinting, Princess Sistina, the sixth princess of the Shiga

Kingdom, entered the room with her usual pair of ladies-in-waiting trailing behind. Her tawny hair was in a gentle ponytail today, giving her a softer appearance than usual.

Since there was only one parlor in my house, the maid must have brought her here not knowing Zena and the others were already occupying the room.

“I apologize that I couldn’t come when you invited me yesterday.”

“I’m just glad it’s nothing serious. Why, I could scarcely sleep at night for worry that something might happen to you, Lord Satou.”

Well, she’s probably more worried about my spell-creation knowledge than me personally.

“We’re hooome! Whoa, it’s a madhouse in here.”

“Mm. Chaos.”

At that moment, Arisa and Mia came back from an outing.

“Shouldn’t we relocate to a bigger room?”

Taking Arisa’s suggestion, we moved to the reception room that I’d never had a chance to use before.



“Now, if it’s all right, please allow me to introduce you to everyone. This is Her Highness Princess Sistina, sixth princess of the Shiga Kingdom.”

When I introduced her, the princess gave a dignified curtsy.

Zena and her squad looked frozen with nerves. Lilio and Lou tried to escape on the way to the reception room, but Iona caught them and dragged them along.

Tama and Pochi had been captured by Liza and were sitting in a corner of the room in zipped-lips mode.

The only one of my companions who wasn’t here at the moment was Hikaru, who was at the royal castle.

“She looks smart.”

“Yeah, that ‘glasses’ thingy is a magic tool, right? I know all about it.”

“That’s crazy, Lilio.”

Lilio and Lou were speaking in hushed whispers.

Since Miss Karina and Zena had already met in Labyrinth City, I introduced them both to the princess next.

“This is Lady Karina, second daughter of my lord Count Muno.”

At that, Zena and her squad (who hadn’t heard about the promotions) whispered among themselves: “Count?” “Wasn’t he a baron?”

“So this is Lord Satou’s lord’s daughter...”

The slender princess’s eyes fell on Miss Karina’s more-than-ample bosom.

I’m sure she was just looking at Raka, the Intelligent Item Karina wore on her chest.

“Your father must have quite the eye for people. Are you perhaps Lord Satou’s fiancée?”

“N-no! M-most certainly not!”

Karina turned bright red at the princess’s question.

That was all well and good, but flailing her arms in front of her face was rather unladylike.

“And this is Miss Zena Marienteil, a dear friend of mine who’s come from Seiryuu County to research in Labyrinth City, along with her colleagues, Miss Iona, Miss Lou, and Miss Lilio.”

Whoops, I made the rest of Zena’s squad sound more like her hangers-on.

“Pleased to meet you, Zena of the Marienteil family. Any friend of Lord Satou’s is a friend of mine. Do come to me if ever you need anything.”

“Th-thank you. You do me a great honor.”

Miss Zena looked flummoxed by the princess’s misleading statement but managed to give a stiff military salute.

“By the way, Lady Tina, were you just here to say hi or what?” Arisa addressed

the princess in a point-blank manner.

“A-Arisa, no! You can’t talk like that to a princess...!”

Zena scrambled to cover Arisa’s mouth.

“Not to worry,” the princess responded breezily. “I have given her my permission.”

Back when they were playing detective together, Arisa had addressed the princess a lot more formally. They must have become close enough during their visit yesterday that she had gotten permission to speak to her casually and even with a pet name.

“Wha...? I had no idea... I’m sorry, Arisa.”

Zena released Arisa’s mouth.

“Yes, she is my fellow pupil.”

“Your what?” I blurted out before I could stop myself.

Pupil of what, exactly?

“Arisa and Lady Mia are star pupils of the Supreme Spell Researcher Lord Satou, are they not? I wish to become your pupil as well from today onward.”

Now that was unexpected.

“You’re called the Supreme Spell Researcher, Satou?”

Zena’s wide eyes said clearly that she had never heard of such a thing.

Don’t worry—this is the first I’m hearing of it, too. It’s not even in my list of titles.

“I wasn’t aware I had such an alias.”

“We made it up ourselves.”

Arisa and Mia puffed out their chests.

“Satou, are you able to use magic now?”

“No, I’m afraid I’ve yet to master chanting. I’ve just been studying spells as a hobby on the road since we left Seiryuu City.”

That was the truth, no “Fabrication” skill necessary.

“How ambitious, studying during your travels!” Zena exclaimed, taking a generous interpretation.

“Tina, go on?”

Plopping herself down on my knee, Mia prompted the princess to continue.

“Ah, yes. Lord Satou, have you any interest in delay runes? I came to invite you to the royal academy, as the former head court mage is giving a lecture.”

“That sounds fascinating. Yes, I’d love to attend.”

I’d been interested in delay runes since hearing about them at the royal research institute.

“When is the lecture? I hope it doesn’t overlap with the kingdom meeting, as I’m afraid I must be present for that.”

“Not to worry. It happens to be the day after the kingdom meeting concludes.”

Perfect. I should be able to go without a problem, then.

“I shall make the arrangements at once.”

The princess bounced out of the salon eagerly. I guess that really was all she’d wanted.

“Lady Tina left already...”

“Mm, free-spirited.”

Arisa and Mia returned from seeing the princess to the door, shrugging at each other.

“Meeew—”

Looking more relaxed now that there was no royalty present, Tama flopped into my lap and went limp like a stuffed animal.

Pochi, also freed from Liza’s clutches, plunked herself down next to Karina.

“Master, Karina came to talk to you about school, sir!”

“School...?”

I turned toward Miss Karina.

“I-indeed. Yesterday, Menea invited me to participate in a special class taking place at the royal academy during their spring break.”

So she was here on similar business to Princess Sistina?

“Missus Karina, question! What kind of special class exactly?”

Arisa bounced eagerly toward Karina.

“What kind...? Erm, I believe Menea said it’s something like an audit that allows members of the public to experience the academy.”

“So it’s like a trial enrollment, not just a one-off class?”

“Y-yes, I suppose so.”

Karina looked alarmed by Arisa’s intense questioning.

“Awww yeeeah!” Arisa shouted. “So it’s finally time for the school arc!”

Not that it mattered, but I’d call it more of an academy arc than a school arc.

“I mean, a school arc is almost as guaranteed a perma-WIP as a tournament arc and a dungeon-crawling arc!”

Apparently, WIP is short for *work in progress*, and in web novels and fan fiction, it meant a story that would probably never get finished.

“Woooo, let’s gooooo!”

“Arisa, mind your manners!”

As Arisa jumped onto a chair and started crowing, Lulu quickly pulled her down.

“Awww, c’moon!”

“Don’t you realize we still have guests?”

“I’m sowwyyyy.”

Arisa hung her head exaggeratedly as Lulu quietly scolded her.

“Great work on li’l Menea’s part, though. If she didn’t have such a bad habit of trying to show off to master, I’d invite her over more often.”

“...Menea?”

Arisa’s blabbering set off a reaction from Zena.

“Sounds like yet another new girl’s name.”

“Watch your back, Zenacchi.”

“That’s enough, you two.”

Miss Iona chided Lilio and Lou as they teased Zena.

“Lady Menea is a princess of the Lumork Kingdom.”

“A-another princess?!”

“Please calm down, Lady Zena.”

Liza handed Zena some cold fruited water.

“Your boy toy does seem to know a lot of princesses and generals and bigwigs like that.”

“We just happened to meet in the old capital. Princess Menea adores Lady Karina like an older sister.”

I explained my relationship with the princess to Zena by way of Lilio.

Probably best not to mention that Princess Menea could be a little touchy-feely.

“Lady Karina, do you know what the classes are about specifically?” I asked Karina, mostly to change the subject.

“I’m told there are all kinds. Spring sessions for children who are about to enter preschool, special classes for students who want to enroll in the royal academy, spring field trips, and so on.”

Miss Karina placed a sheaf of papers with more information on the table.

Arisa peered over my shoulder.

“Huh, there really are all kinds...”

If you excelled in the field-trip class, you could get an exemption from the entrance exams or even a free scholarship.

There were other special lectures and demonstrations like the one Princess Sistina had invited me to as well.

“Pochi wants to go, sir!”

“Tama toooo?”

That was no surprise.

“Master, there will be many larvae in the preschool classes, I report.”

Nana sounded very excited.

“Interested.”

“Yeah, the delay-rune lecture Lady Tina mentioned sounds like fun, and there are lots of other cool-sounding classes, too. I’ll give it a go.”

“What about you, Liza?”

“I shall accompany the others.”

Liza didn’t seem as interested in the lectures as she was worried about Tama and Pochi.

“There aren’t any cooking classes, are there?”

“They have a ‘young ladies’ course’ that sounds like a home ec class. Maybe that has cooking classes, too?”

I scanned the sheets again to answer Lulu.

While Tama and Pochi had classes with their private tutor, it shouldn’t be a problem if we scheduled those around the royal academy classes.

“Instruction from the Shiga Eight?!”

“Whoa! That’s a rich-kid school for ya!”

As Miss Iona was reading off the notes on the special classes, Lou yelped excitedly.

The teachers were the seventh seat of the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga, Mr. Heim “the Weedy,” and the eighth seat, Miss Ryuona “the Grass Cutter.”

“I would love to study swordsmanship under them just once.”

“Yeah, I bet they’re amaaazing...”

Iona and Lou sighed longingly.

“Oui oooui...?”

“Mr. Heim is amazing, sir!”

Tama nodded, and Pochi boasted proudly.

“You make it sound like you know the guy.”

“We dooo...?”

“Tama and Pochi got lots of good learning from Mr. Heim, sir!”

Tama and Pochi bobbed their heads at Lou.

“Yeah, right...”

“That’d be the day.”

Lilio and Lou didn’t believe Tama and Pochi in the slightest, despite their protests.

“What they’re saying is the truth. When we were invited to the Holy Knights’ barracks, Mr. Heim was kind enough to instruct them.”

When I confirmed, it got a wide-eyed reaction out of not only Lilio and Lou but even Zena and Iona.

Was it really that hard to believe?

“I’m baaaack! What’d I miss?”

“M-Miss Mito!”

When Hikaru cheerfully barged in from the hallway, Zena jumped up with a cry of surprise.

“Oh, hey, you’re John’s ex-GF’s pal.”

“Don’t call me his ex-GF,” Lilio grumbled, looking away.

I’d forgotten that Zena and her squad said they’d fought alongside Hikaru not once but twice on their way to Labyrinth City.

“What’s wrong, Lilio?”

Lilio was peering behind and around Hikaru.

“He’s not with you?”

“Who? ...Ah, you mean Johnny?”

Lilio nodded without looking directly at Hikaru.

“Sorry, I haven’t seen him since we parted ways in Zetts County.”

“Gotcha... Wonder if he’s with those busty babes, then.”

This time, Lilio glanced at Nana.

“If you refer to my sisters, they are training in Bolenan Forest, I declare.”

“Bolenan Forest? You don’t mean...”

“In the elf village, I add.”

“For real?!” Lilio exclaimed.

“Whoa, I’m amazed you got those standoffish elves to let in outsiders like that.”

Hikaru looked at me with admiration.

The elves in the village were so friendly that I forgot their race had an overall reputation for keeping to themselves.

“S-Satou, who might this be?”

Miss Karina cowered behind me, tugging on my sleeve.

“Her name’s Mito, a master of Practical Magic. Mito, this is Lady Karina, daughter of my employer, Count Muno.”

The first sentence was directed toward Karina, the second toward Hikaru.

“Nice to meetcha.”

“Y-yes, the pleasure is all mine, I’m sure.”

I valiantly pretended not to hear Hikaru mutter something like, “Those things are huge. I bet my Ichirou would love them.”

“Y-you aren’t Satou’s fiancée, are you?”

“Satou’s fiancée?! ”

Karina's misguided question elicited something like a shriek of dismay from Zena.

"No, not at all."

I was quick to nip that falsehood in the bud.

"My beloved is a friend of Satou's. He's gone missing, you see. Satou was nice enough to let me stay here until I find him."

"Oh, so that's it!" Zena said much more brightly.

I guess she was confused about what Hikaru was doing here.

Karina let loose a sigh of relief, too.

"Y'know, you and Miss Mito actually look a lot alike."

"Yes, they do."

"I bet they're from the same homeland."

Zena's squad murmured among themselves.

This "John" who was Lilio's ex-boyfriend evidently said of Mito that he *picked her up in some ruins*.

Neither John's nor Zena's squad seemed to realize that Hikaru was really the ancestral king Yamato said to be asleep in those ruins.

A maid whispered in Lulu's ear, and she turned to me with a question.

"What shall we do for dinner, master? I'm sure Miss Zena and company are quite tired from their journey. Perhaps I should make something gentler on the stomach than *osechi*?"

"*Osechi*? You mean the meal that shows up in the tales of the ancestral king?"

"The one that the legendary chef Tseng was devoted to re-creating to help soothe the ancestral king's homesickness?"

Zena and Karina pressed toward Lulu eagerly.

"U-um, what? Erm... Master, please help me..."

I went to Lulu's rescue as she begged and asked her to bring in the *osechi* dishes.

If we changed the meal now out of concern for Zena's squad's health, I got the feeling they'd just be disappointed.

Since the sakura trees in the garden were in full bloom, I decided it might be nice to have the *osechi* meal there.

"Shall we eat outside tonight?"

The sun had already set, but that wasn't a problem, since the garden was lit by magic items.

"I didn't know you had sakura trees in your garden."

"Yes. And look over there, Miss Zena."

"Over where...? ...Oooh!"

In the distance was the giant Royal Sakura that rose above the royal castle, lit up from below to create a fantastical sight.

"So that's the famous Royal Sakura."

"It's so ephemeral, yet strong enough to dye everything cherry-blossom pink."

Zena and Iona gazed at the enormous tree in admiration.

"Do they have flower viewing in Seiryuu City, too?"

"Yes, the meadows are beautiful when the white clovers are in full bloom! We all bring box lunches and make flower garlands."

"That sounds like fun."

I'll have to stop by Seiryuu City during flower-viewing season sometime.

"It is! I'd love to show you next time!"

"Yes, please do."

Noticing her friends smirking in our direction, Zena turned so red, I could practically see steam coming out of her ears.

Just then, Tama and Pochi arrived with rolled-up rugs.

"Rugggyyy?"

"We're the rug runners, sir!"

The pair spread the fluffy rugs out in the garden.

Naturally, they then proceeded to roll around and play on said rugs until Liza scolded them.

“These are so soft. And large, too... What kind of fur is this?”

“We got these hides from an areamaster of the labyrinth’s middle stratum called a Wooly Ancient Tiger.”

Zena blinked when Liza answered her question.

“Th-this fur is from an areamaster?”

“Correct, I confirm. It is quite pleasant to the touch, yes.”

“Mm, agreed.”

Nana and Mia nodded, gently stroking the fur.

“Dinner is ready, everyone.”

Lulu came out with the maids, dishing out multitiered boxes full of *osechi* food.

Tonight’s *ozouni* soup was the kind with clear broth and grilled mochi.

“S-so this is *osechi*...”

“Talk about a feast!”

“I’ve never seen such dishes before.”

“Daaamn...”

Zena, Lilio, Iona, and Lou all murmured their admiration.

“Karina, the roast beef is delicious, sir.”

“Lobster is yummy, tooooo...?”

Pochi and Tama sat on either side of Karina and began putting their favorite dishes on her plate.

“Lady Zena, if I may be so bold, allow me to serve you.”

“Thank you, Liza.”

Liza piled food onto Zena’s plate with an intense expression.

She hadn't included her beloved *boudara* in the first round; maybe she realized it was too tough for some humans.

"You're a lucky lady, getting waited on by the great Baronetess Kishreshigarza," Arisa joked.

"Baronetess Kishreshigarza?"

"That is Liza's family name and rank, I report," Nana responded.

"Huh?"

"An orangescale as a baronetess?"

Zena's dumbfounded question was drowned out by exclamations from her squad.

"Only by the fruits of master's training."

While Liza's expression was cool, her tail rhythmically swished back and forth.

She must be proud.

"Looks like your vassal pulled ahead of you, boy-o."

"Lilio, don't be rude!" Zena scolded.

"It's all right, Miss Zena. No doubt Sir Pendragon was promoted as well."

I nodded confirmation of Iona's self-assured statement.

"Congratulations, Satou!"

Zena clapped her hands together.

"Man, you got even fancier, huh? What is it this time, an honorary baronet? Or permanent, even?"

"Permanent, yes. A viscount, as it happens."

"Viscount?"

All of Zena's squad gasped at my response.

"Y-you're a viscount now, Satou? A *viscount* viscount?"

"Calm down, Zena. He's a viscount just like Viscount Belton now."

Iona attempted to reassure Zena.

“S-Satou...erm, Lord Viscount...”

“You can keep calling me by my name. As long as we’re not at an official function, please just treat me the same as always.”

It felt a little hurtful to be treated formally by a friend.

“Boy, mithril explorers are something else. Maybe we should aim to beat a floormaster, too?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Yeah, Iona’s right. That’d be a suicide mission for us.”

Iona and Lou shook their heads at Lilio’s joke.

“Ah-ha-ha, master and Liza are special, that’s all.” Arisa laughed. “The rest of us just became honorary knights.”

“Special...?”

“Well, it’s obvious in master’s case, right? And Liza got challenged to a fight by Mr. Juleburg, the head of the Shiga Eight, and ended up winning.”

““““She won?””””

Zena and her friends all looked stunned.

“Juleburg as in ‘the Unstoppable’?”

“That’s right. Nana fought the Holy Shield user Reilus, too, and master took on some Shiga Eight candidates and such.”

Arisa knew me well, if the fact that she conveniently left out my fight with Mr. Gouen was anything to go by.

At this rate, I was afraid the likes of Lilio and Lou would spread rumors in Labyrinth City that I was nominated for the Shiga Eight, so I changed the topic to focus on them.



They said that they were currently working on expanding the hunting grounds with the Pendra graduates from the explorers' school.

"And we all do the same daily run as Liza—I mean, Her Excellency the Baronetess."

"Lady Zena, please continue to simply call me Liza. It is only thanks to you putting your life on the line to protect me that I am here today."

"Y-yes, ma'am."

"If possible, please don't be so formal with me, either."

Zena looked to me uncertainly about Liza's request.

"As long as it's all right with you, please feel free to take her up on that."

"A-all right. I'll do that as long as we're not in public, then."

Liza looked relieved at Zena's assent.

"...So you performed onstage with a master musician, Lady Mia?"

"Mm, fun."

Meanwhile, Iona and Mia were chatting—an unusual combination.

"You kiddos still training here, too?"

"*Oui oooui...?*"

"Tama's been training at a sculpture studio, in fact. Look, that *Dreaming Candy Apple* statue over there is her latest work."

"No way—you made this? That's crazy."

"They're going to enter it into a competition."

"For real?"

"That's awesome, kiddo."

"Nyeh-heh-heh...?"

Lou and Lilio showered Tama with praise.

"Pochi's writing novels, too, sir!"

Pochi took out a thick bundle of papers from her Fairy Pack and showed it to Karina.

“An adventure story, is it? Quite impressive.”

“I have been teaching the children of the orphanage to make dolls, I announce.”

Nana produced a doll from her own pack.

“V-very cute,” Hikaru commented.

“Ma’am... I mean, Liza, have you been doing anything new since coming to the royal capital?”

“No, I’m afraid my spear is all I have.”

“Come on—don’t be so modest. The maids said there’s been a nonstop stream of fighters requesting sparring matches and instruction from you.”

Evidently, they’d been having these matches in a field outside the city so as not to bother our neighbors.

“Did some Shiga Eight candidates really come, too?”

“Yes, that was a good match.” Liza nodded with satisfaction.

“At this rate, they might just invite you to the Shiga Eight someday,” Zena remarked with a smile.

“They did,” Mia mumbled.

“Huh?”

“The leader already invited her,” Arisa clarified. “Aaand she already declined.”

“Whaaaat?!”

Zena’s entire squad jumped up in shock.

“My spear and loyalty are reserved solely for my master.”

Liza’s expression was dignified.

“That’s amazing, Liza.”

“Not at all. I still have a long way to go before I can measure up to master.”

Zena squinted at Liza's humble reaction, as if she was too bright to look at.

"We can't fall behind! Lilio, Miss Iona, Lou! Once we've paid our respects to the count, let's head back to Labyrinth City first thing in the morning."

Hearing about my group's accomplishments appeared to have motivated Zena.

Still, it seemed a little too hasty to rush out of the royal capital right after arriving.

Their journey here sounded like it had been a nonstop forced march with the help of various potions. They should really rest a little before heading back.

"Awww, c'mon, let's get some more good eats here before we go."

"Yeah! No harm in taking it easy for two or three days, I say."

"The horses must be tired, too, I'm sure."

The rest of Zena's squad clearly wanted a break as well.



"Well, Satou, we're going back to Labyrinth City!"

"You really shouldn't push yourself..."

"It's okay! We're all full of energy thanks to the potions you gave us!"

I guess the potions I gave them to relieve their exhaustion had backfired on me.

I'd given them some for the horses, too, assuring them that I made them by the barrel, so even their mounts looked raring to go.

"All right. But please be careful on the way."

"Of course, Satou."

Zena smiled at me sunnily.

Then she fell silent for some reason, which left us awkwardly gazing into each other's eyes.

"Guilty?"

“No, maybe not?”

The iron-wall pair exchanged whispers behind me.

“Zenny, were you able to see Count Seiryuu?”

“Yes, he praised our loyalty, which feels a little wrong...”

Always the honest sort, Zena seemed to feel guilty about the slight deception.

Count Seiryuu hadn’t returned until late at night, she said, so they were able to meet for only a short time.

Zena glanced at Liza, who was standing at my side.

“Liza, we’re going to get stronger, too, I promise. So you’ll be proud to call me the person who saved your life.”

“I have no doubt of that, Lady Zena.”

Liza nodded firmly at Zena’s declaration.

“No worriiies...?”

“Exactly, sir! You’re gonna get superstrong for sure, Zena, sir!”

“Mm. Good luck.”

“Stay safe, I declare.”

“Do your best; just don’t go too overboard.”

The rest of my group all encouraged Zena as well.

“W-wait!”

Lulu called out to stop Zena as she turned to leave.

“Thank goodness I caught you. Here, I made you a box lunch. Please eat it later if you’d like.”

“Thank you, Miss Lulu. We’ll happily accept.”

Tama and Pochi closed their eyes and sniffed the tasty scents wafting from the bento boxes.

“Let’s meet again soon in Labyrinth City, Satou!”

“Of course. We’ll return around the end of the month.”

I wanted to at least stop by before we headed out on a journey around the world.

“Well, I’ll b— EEEEEEEEEEEK!”

As soon as she got astride her horse, it took off at an impressive speed.

Maybe my exhaustion-recovery potions were a little too effective.

“L-Lady Zena!”

“Oh nooo...?”

“It’s an emergency, sir!”

The beastfolk girls went running after Zena and her squad.

“Will they be all right?”

“Yes, not to worry.”

Liza and the others quickly caught up and helped slow down the horse. An experienced rider like Zena should be able to handle it from there as long as she wasn’t caught by surprise like that again.

“Mia, if you don’t mind...”

“Spirits?”

“Yeah, could you summon a sylph and have it keep watch over them from the skies in invisibility mode?”

“Got it.”

Mia staunchly put a hand to her chest, accepting my request.

“Honestly, master, you’re so overprotective.” Arisa shook her head in disbelief.

“I’m just being careful.”

Besides, if I hadn’t asked Mia to do that, I was sure Arisa would have.

She’s just as much of a worrywart as I am.

Royal Academy

Satou here. Sometimes you see fantasy novels, manga, and so on do spin-offs or side stories in a school setting. Some people might hate it, but personally, I'm pretty fond of the way it often leads to heartwarming scenes you wouldn't see in the main story.

"We're heeere?"

"Sir!"

After we saw off Zena and the others, we went to the royal academy.

I had to go to the day's kingdom meeting again, but I came along as their guardian, since there was still some time before it started. We left Hikaru behind, as she wasn't a morning person.

"It's as big as a college campus."

Arisa looked around the expansive grounds from the imposing gate.

"That's because there are several different schools on the grounds."

The royal academy was an educational institution consisting of six main school buildings: the senior high school, the nobles' school, the magic school, the knights' school, the ladies' school, and the preschool.

There were other buildings on campus, too, like the massive library that boasted an impressive collection and lecture halls of all shapes and sizes.

Off campus, there were even more school buildings and training grounds.

"Huh, the magic school and knights' school are pretty self-explanatory, but what about the others? Is the ladies' school like an all-girls' finishing school?"

"Yes, that's right. As for the rest..."

I nodded and relayed to Arisa what knowledge I'd collected.

The senior high school was a place for higher education like a university in

Japan, where anyone with outstanding grades could enroll regardless of social status.

The nobles' school, of course, was for children of noble families. The preschool for young children was attended mostly by children of honorary nobles and wealthier commoners, not permanent nobles' kids, who usually hired in-home private tutors instead.

"Master, information located, I report."

"New nobles' class? Is this the one we need?"

Nana was pointing at a signboard standing at the side of the road.

"This arrow says, Special Lectures, Reception."

"Master, this one says, Special Classes, Reception."

"General Lek-chuuurs...?"

"I found Preeeschool Classed Room, sir!"

The girls ran around pointing out more signs.

"Just a moment, please. I believe the information we need is in the guide Lady Karina gave us."

Lulu pulled out the papers from her Fairy Pack.

The "special lectures" were for advanced studies of specific topics like the delay-rune lecture Princess Sistina had mentioned, while the "new nobles' class" and the others belonged to the special classes Karina mentioned.

First and foremost, we followed the arrows to the reception area for the new nobles' class, which my group needed most urgently and lasted only a few days. As we walked along the path, we found a crowd forming up ahead.

It was a throng of middle-school-aged boys and girls.

"It's a duel, sir!"

"Probably a sparring match, right? They're using wooden swords."

Pochi hopped up and down at the sight of the match taking place up ahead.

Since we could barely see over the crowd of students, Tama and Pochi sat on

Liza's and Nana's shoulders to watch.

Mia and Arisa wanted to see, too, so I hefted them both up.

"They're baaad...?"

"Clumsy."

"They're probably both beginners."

Liza chided Tama and Mia.

"That's true, but the skinny one can barely even stand under the weight of the weapon and armor. It'd be better if they built up some stamina before trying any matches, or somebody might get hurt."

Before Arisa even finished her constructive criticism, the match was already over.

"That was a clean victory, Barry."

"It's nothing to be proud of with an opponent like that."

"Like a girl could ever beat the son of the Zorgon family."

The victorious boy's hangers-on gathered around to butter him up.

"You're not cut out for this, you know. Why don't you give up on trying to be a knight and do something for girls, like embroidery or dancing?"

The boy jeered some sexist remarks at the opponent he'd defeated.

"Great, another nasty little jerk. Why are all the young nobles in this kingdom so weird?"

"Mm, dullard."

"That's not necessarily true. Most of them are perfectly normal. It's just that the weird ones stick out in your mind more."

I lowered Arisa and Mia to the ground as I explained cognitive bias to them.

"Barry's right. You'd be better off at the ladies' school."

"N-no, I'm going to become a knight."

The girl picked herself up off the ground, still breathing hard.

“Not gonna happen, girly. You’ve got no natural talent or instincts for this stuff. Hard to believe you’re the daughter of a former Shiga Eight member.”

A former Shiga Eight member’s daughter...?

I hadn’t noticed because she was wearing a helmet, but it was none other than Mr. Gouen’s daughter Sherin.

“W-well, I’m still going to train at the knights’ school and become a Holy Knight.”

“And what, restore your family’s honor? In your dreams.”

The nasty boy kept insulting Sherin.

I could see her desperately chewing her lip as he mocked her goals.

Yeah, I can’t just look the other way on this.

“That’s quite enough, if you please.”

I jumped over the crowd and stepped in to protect Sherin from the rude boy and his friends.

“Y-you’re...!”

“Good to see you again, miss.”

I was impressed that she remembered me from our meeting a few days prior.

“Who’re you supposed to be?!” the rude boy demanded.

“No one worth mentioning, really.”

“What the hell?! You trying to be that cadet’s white knight or something?!”

The boy flew into a rage at my answer.

“That useless klutz is never gonna pass the entrance exam for the knights’ school!”

“We’re just being nice by putting her in her place!”

The boy’s friends all pelted insults as well.

Just as I was opening my mouth to tell them off, there was a bellow of rage from the other side of the crowd.

“You there! Who gave you permission to do this?!”

“Oh crap, it’s Hagemais.”

“Run for it! If he catches us, we’ll have to do penalty drills!”

“Tch, he showed up fast this year.”

The rude boy and his friends scattered as soon as they heard the teacher’s voice.

Apparently, they were enrolled students and had started this little match of their own accord.

“I-is it really so wrong not to have any natural talent...?”

Bitter tears filled Sherin’s eyes as she murmured her innermost feelings.

“Natural talent is only a nice bonus. If you just keep practicing the sword without giving up, someday you’ll become a knight your father can be proud of.”

I was worried this might seem like lip service, but I sincerely wanted to cheer her on.

“You really think so...?”

“As long as you keep steadfastly pursuing that dream, I promise it will come true.”

Especially in a world with a level system, where she could build up experience points to get stronger.

“Satou is right.”

A large hand came to rest on top of Sherin’s head.

“Sir Heim!”

“Sorry that took so long. I got the headmaster’s permission for you to take the course.”

Mr. Heim, a Shiga Eight member and friend of her father’s, appeared to be the one who had brought her to the royal academy.

“I owe ya, Satou. We’ve got plenty of guards, but I guess they can’t be

bothered to stop a fight among kids.”

Checking my radar, I saw that there were indeed several guards in disguise.

I guess Sherin needs to be guarded when she goes out.

“Don’t tell me...”

“Yep, the folks who gave her permission are probably using her as bait to try to lure out the last of the anti-Vistall rebels.” Heim scowled. “Shameless bastards.”

He added, though, that it was Sherin who had asked to leave the villa.

“Misterrr?”

“It’s Mr. Heim, sir!”

Arisa brought over the rest of the group.

“Oh-ho, Tama and Pochi, eh? Always in high spirits, you two.”

Mr. Heim patted both their heads.

“By the by, Pochi...”

“Yes, sir?”

“Are you about ready to tell me who you were talking to during the red-rope incident?”

“P-Pochi wasn’t talking to anyone, sir!”

It didn’t help that she kept glancing over at me in her panic.

“Herself.”

“E-exactly, sir! I’m a pro at talking to myself, sir!”

Pochi latched on to Mia’s murmured suggestion.

“Ah, well, if you’re a pro, that’s another story.”

“Exactly, sir. It’s another story, sir.”

Mr. Heim barely bit back a grin as Pochi wiped the sweat from her brow with a visibly relieved expression.

I guess he just likes teasing her.

“Eeeeeek... I say!”

“B-Barry!”

A boy went flying into the air along with a scream.

The latter sounded like Miss Karina.

“Karinaaaa—?”

“Karina’s in trouble, sir!”

Tama and Pochi ran off.

“That was an incredible kick!”

“Is she here for the special class at the knights’ school?”

“Geez, we’ve got a strong crop this year.”

The boys in the crowd murmured among themselves.

“Sorry, it seems one of my friends has gotten herself into trouble. Please excuse me.”

With that, I left Mr. Heim behind and headed toward Karina.

“You pass with flying colors, young lady! Now, come with me! Registration for the knights’ school is right this way.”

“E-erm, pardon? Wait just a moment if you wouldn’t mind...”

Karina was shrinking away from a burly teacher.

“No need to be shy! You surely came for the special classes to join the knights’ school, correct? Well, you’ve no need to take any tests or lectures.”

“No grabbiing...?”

“You mustn’t pick on Karina, sir!”

“Tama, Pochi... I’m ever so glad to see you.”

The animal-eared duo stepped in front of Karina to protect her from the teacher attempting to take her by the arm.

“Excuse me, are you a teacher from the knights’ school?”

“Indeed I am, young one.”

“My friend is the daughter of His Excellency Count Muno, here to take the new nobles’ class. Please refrain from forcing her into anything.”

I used my “Fabrication” skill to make up an excuse that she was here for another course, since this guy seemed like a pain to deal with.

“But I would hate to let go of a potential student with a kick like that...”

He must have thought Raka’s “Bestow Strength Enhancement” was Karina’s own skill.

“I beg you, at least take a trial visit to our course! The new nobles’ class is only three days long, as I recall! We would love to have you afterward!”

“What would you like to do, Lady Karina?”

The teacher was so enthusiastic that I figured I might as well ask Karina what she wanted.

“I’d be nervous to go alone, I must say.”

Lady Karina looked at me pleadingly.

Well, in that case...

“Sorry, Liza, but would you mind accompanying Lady Karina to audit a course?”

“Certainly not, master.”

I asked Liza because our eyes happened to meet.

I could’ve gone with her myself, but even though I was a vassal of her family, her being accompanied by an unmarried man might hurt Miss Karina’s marriage prospects.

“Master’s so dense when it comes to things like this.”

“Mm, agreed.”

As Miss Karina puffed up her cheeks, Arisa and Mia muttered something rather rude.

“Master, the new nobles’ class registration is in that building, I report.”

Nana and Lulu returned from the other side of the crowd.

It appeared they had gone all the way to an office to ask about it.

Once I got everyone registered and brought them to the site of the new nobles' class, I began the lonely journey to the kingdom meeting all by myself.



"Master, I wish to study in the same classroom as Pochi and Tama, I report."

When I returned from the kingdom meeting, Nana immediately met me at the door with a request.

Although I needed to take care of the huge number of letters that came to my office every day, it shouldn't hurt to put that off for a bit, since most of them were invitations to tea parties and banquets or marriage proposals.

Occasionally, we got letters from people thanking my group for rescuing them at the end of the year, challenging Liza to a duel or sparring match, offering me jobs in their service, or trying to borrow money, but those were all pretty rare.

Most investments were discussed in person at the salon after the kingdom meeting or at balls and so on.

"Were they in a different classroom?"

"Preed school...?"

"That's right, sir! There were lots and lots of other kids our age, sir!"

Maybe they were put in the preschool class?

"The lecturer lady said they needed to learn the basics in preschool first and shoved them into the preschool class for the spring semester."

Ah. I supposed that made sense, since they both looked and acted like the children they were.

"My transfer request was denied, I complain."

"Probably because you look like an adult, Nana."

"Discrimination based on appearance is unfair, I protest."

Nana evidently wanted to study in the classroom with the children.

"Lulu, Mia, and I all got passing marks in etiquette and fundamentals. They

said we could go to other classes during our free time without any extra fees.”

Since the initial tuition was fairly high, they were allowed to take any other class within the program.

“Mia and I went to the special lecture at the magic school. And Lulu took one at the ladies’ school, right, Lulu?”

Lulu nodded. It was basically a finishing school, where upper-class young ladies studied academics and culture.

“Today we studied embroidery and tea-party etiquette.”

I was glad Lulu had enjoyed herself.

Fortunately, it seemed like no one had insulted or picked on her that day.

“Not to worry. I walked Lulu to the ladies’ school, and it was all girls from lesser noble families or moderately wealthy farmers and so on. It looks like most of the people who participate in the short-term special classes aren’t terribly rich.”

Arisa whispered in my ear.

As usual, she’d guessed exactly what I was worried about.

“Master, the etiquette class is difficult, I report.”

“Yes, I’m afraid I don’t entirely understand the behavior that is expected of nobles.”

It sounded like Nana and Liza had had a relatively hard time.

“Well, when in doubt, just do as master would do...or not. On second thought, he’s not exactly normal. Maybe if you try to imagine members of Count Muno’s family?”

Ouch, Arisa.

“Very well. I shall do my very best... I say?”

“I say, quite understood, I confirm.”

Liza and Nana tried imitating Karina’s manner of speech.

“No, you don’t have to copy the way they talk...”

Arisa giggled, prompting Tama and Pochi to start imitating Karina, too, until the conversation devolved into an impression contest.



“I feel like I’m back in my school days.”

The final day of the royal meeting ended before the afternoon, so I went to the royal academy to check on my kids.

While the delay-rune lecture I was looking forward to wasn’t until tomorrow, I had time to kill until the royal meeting wrap-up banquet that evening.

You could also say that I was taking refuge at the academy: The bigwigs would be continuing their tricky maneuvering and negotiating until evening, and I had no interest in sticking my nose in that.

I’d changed into a lighter outfit in the carriage on the way here, since my fancy upper-noble duds for the royal meeting would look very out of place when not in the royal castle.

“Hikaru!”

I spotted Hikaru in the plaza in front of the school gates, looking up at a statue of its founder.

“Ah! Ichi... Satou.”

Her eyes sparkled for just a moment before she corrected herself a little sadly.

“Are you here for a lecture, too?”

“Uh-uh. Just a little stroll down memory lane, you might say.”

From her point of view, since she’d just woken up from a magical cryo-sleep of several hundred years, it was probably like she’d gone to sleep for a night and woken up to find almost everyone she knew was dead. I couldn’t blame her for feeling melancholic.

“Gotcha. Did you know the founder of the school, too?”

“Uh-huh. Melbon was born into a farming family. While we were traveling together, he learned all kinds of things from me and the rest of our friends and

ended up getting really smart. He was a great assistant prime minister when I became king, and he was always saying that he wanted to start a school in the royal capital someday.”

“Looks like he made his dream come true, then.”

It was obvious from a glance at the students walking around excitedly: This was a good school.

“Uh-huh. I’m really proud of him.”

Hikaru kept gazing up at the statue.

I left without another word, not wanting to interrupt her reverie.

“Step right up for the free ‘Chant’ special class, a prerequisite for the magic school! The class is almost full.”

After walking for a while, I heard a girl in robes calling out to prospective students.

Now that was a class I should definitely check out.

“Excuse me, I’d like to attend the ‘Chant’ class...”

“Great! Right this way.”

Somehow, she reminded me of a waitress at a pub or family restaurant.

I must have gotten the last seat, because the girl guiding me—a student of the magic school—stopped what she was doing to lead me directly to the rooftop where the class was being held. I sat down in the farthest seat back, and the class began right away.

Oh?

In the very front seat was Mr. Gouen’s daughter Sherin, listening intently to the teacher’s explanation.

She must be taking the course because the Holy Knights, and therefore the Shiga Eight, required the ability to use Light Magic.

“■, this is the chant for the Everyday Magic spell Breeze. If you enunciate it more slowly, it’s a long chant that begins with ‘lyuu—lyu liaru—lonea...’ Now, this chant...”

I'd heard this explanation from Zena, Arisa, and others countless times, so I absentmindedly tuned it out.

I was hoping to learn some secret knack, but it was really just a long-winded speech from the magic schoolteacher along the lines of, *If you keep on practicing, one day you'll suddenly be able to do it like you've received a divine revelation.*

I guess since most people's "Chant" skills activated once they built up enough EXP, it probably did work like that, but still...

After the lecture ended, the student "Chant" practice began.

The practice session was led by the magic school students who'd been helping the teacher; after the groups were all set up, the teacher put them in charge and promptly left.

The "Chant" practice was focused on short, simple chants like the Everyday Magic spell Breeze and the Practical Magic spell Signal.

“▼ Breeze Soyokaze”

“◆ Signal Shingou”

“▲ Breeze Soyokaze”

The others were around the same level as I was.

I kept chanting in time with the short staff waved by the student teacher.

“■ Breeze Soyokaze”

Oh, sounds like someone succeeded.

I turned around and saw a smirking boy in a robe, surrounded by hangers-on.

“Cut it out, Barry! Don't get in the way!”

“Oh, come on. I'm just showing these newbs what a real 'Chant' sounds like.”

The female student who was instructing me scolded the boy.

“Yeah, exactly! Sir Zorgon's chants are top of the class.”

“Quit it! You're embarrassing me with all that praise.”

His hangers-on cranked up the boy's smirk by another notch.

“Just ignore them, everyone. Keep on practicing!”

“▼ *Breeze Soyokaze*”

“◆ *Signal Shingou*”

“▲ *Breeze Soyokaze*”

At the student teacher’s prompting, we went back to practicing.

The smirking boy strolled around the practicing students like he was an instructor himself, providing unhelpful advice like, “You’re half a beat behind,” “you got the ‘Chant’ wrong,” and other comments that annoyed the lecture students and their instructor alike.

“Barry, stop distracting us!”

“I’m just giving instructions.”

“And it’s distracting!”

The same female student who’d protested the first time dressed him down again, but he completely blew her off.

“Honestly! First that fool Merkray finally left, and now you, Barry?!”

Realizing that she wasn’t getting anywhere, the girl ran off to get the teacher.

The “Merkray” she mentioned was probably the same noble family whose name had come up during the red-rope incident. Their son, who’d been attending the magic school, was evidently a problem child, too. From what I heard at the salon, the entire Merkray family was on house arrest at their mansion until the investigation was complete.

“Oh? Aren’t you that failure who kept getting beat in the knights’ school class?”

The smirking boy started harassing Sherin, who was in the group next to mine.

“Gave up on being a knight, then?”

“▲ *Light Hakkou*”

The boy scowled as Sherin ignored him and kept practicing.

“Hmph! Not like a girl who gave up on being a knight after three days is gonna do any better at being a mage.”

“Yeah, not gonna happen for a loser like you.”

“No one likes those herb-smelling magic-school girls anyway.”

“Your face isn’t too bad. Why don’t you go to the ladies’ school and try to land yourself a man with prospects instead?”

As the smirking boy piled on insults, his hangers-on joined in as well.

The student who was trying to instruct Sherin looked too frightened of the boy to do anything but flail nervously.

“Would you mind leaving her alone now?”

I couldn’t stand around on the sidelines any longer.

“You again?!”

“Again...?”

Then I remembered. It was the same rude boy who had been sparring with Sherin the day before.

“Yikes, aren’t you a little old to not know ‘Chant’?”

“Sir Barry, he must be some destitute noble or merchant. I bet he didn’t get a proper education.”

As the boy turned his smirk and insults on me, his hangers-on followed suit.

Since I’d changed into lighter clothes before coming to the academy, they seemed to have mistaken me for a lesser noble at best.

“I’m perfectly aware that I have no talent for ‘Chant.’”

Barry burst out laughing at that.

“But you know,” I went on, “I’m not sure I appreciate you little tykes making fun of me for it.”

Despite what it sounded like, I had been practicing “Chant” for almost a year.

“Excuse me?!”

Barry's face twisted with rage. Maybe he wasn't expecting me to stand up to him.

"You're not allowed to call us 'little tykes.'"

"Yeah, yeah! Sir Barry is the second son of Baron Zorgon, you know!"

His hangers-on appeared to be vassals or lesser nobles in his family's service.

"That's quite enough, Barry!"

The door to the roof burst open, and the female student returned.

But it wasn't the teacher who appeared behind her. It was the pink-haired princess of Lumork Kingdom.

"Princess Menea! What are you doing here, Your Highness?!"

"I couldn't find the teacher, so I brought Princess Menea instead!"

The female student shot Barry a triumphant look.

Princess Menea turned toward us.

"Y-Your Highness, I was just—"

"...Sir Satou!"

Ignoring Barry's attempt at an excuse, Menea came running over and hugged me.

She was still as touchy-feely as ever.

"Princess Menea?!"

The students were all shocked at Menea's unexpected behavior.

"H-how do you know this pathet...this guy?"

"Viscount Pendragon is my lov—"

"Viscount?!"

Barry and his friends drowned out the rest of Princess Menea's sentence.

"This guy... I mean, this gentleman is a viscount?"

"Why, of course," Menea replied coolly. Then she turned to me with a suggestive, "If you needed help with 'Chant,' I would be happy to give you

private lessons...”

“Private lessons with the princess!”

Barry and several of the other instructing students all let out strangled cries; Princess Menea must be popular at the magic school.

“Uh-oh, this is bad news.”

“We laughed at the head of a viscount family...”

“W-we better apologize, Sir Barry.”

“...I don’t wanna.” Barry stubbornly refused his friends’ pleas. “A wimpy guy who probably can’t even hold a sword isn’t worthy of Princess Menea.”

He glared at me.

It looked more like he was jealous that the princess was clinging to me than that he actually hated me specifically...

Ah, to be young again.

“Oh? Why, Sir Satou is a candidate for the Shiga Eight.”

“The Shiga Eight?! ”

Barry reared back in shock.

“He was invited to the Holy Knights’ barracks, I believe?”

“Yes, at the end of last year. But technically, since I officially declined, I’m no longer a candidate for the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga.”

“Oh dear, is that right? Did Liza decline her nomination, too, then?”

“She did.” I nodded at Princess Menea.

“Wait a minute, I’ve heard this viscount’s name!”

“Pendragon, like ‘the Untouchable’?! ”

“W-w-we really messed up, Barry!”

Evidently, the hangers-on had heard my name before.

Barry’s face went pale, too.

“Lord Viscount, I apologize for my rudeness.”

“We are so sorry, Lord Viscount!”

Barry threw himself to his knees and bowed his head nearly to the floor, and the other boys followed suit.

Now, that was a speedy attitude adjustment. Noble kids in the royal capital learned the ways of the world from a very young age, it would seem.

“Sir Zorgon, you’ve forgotten to apologize to someone.”

“...Who, her?”

I gestured toward Sherin, who Barry genuinely seemed to have forgotten about.

“S-sorry, miss. I shouldn’t have laughed at your lack of talent.”

You call that an apology?

I cleared my throat, and the boy corrected himself, realizing that wasn’t a real apology.

“No, really, I’m sorry. I take back my insults and apologize. I was wrong.”

“I... I...!”

Sherin hesitated for a moment, then spoke up.

“I might not have the same natural talent as my father. But...!”

Her voice bubbled up like magma that had been building under the surface of the earth.

“But I still won’t give up on being a knight! I’m taking this class because a Holy Knight needs to be able to do magic, too!”

“O-oh, okay...”

Barry seemed taken aback by Sherin’s fierce determination.

Afterward, Sherin and I agreed to accept their apologies, and Barry and his friends scurried away from the roof with their tails between their legs.

“I’m telling the teachers on them later, I promise!”

The female student assured us that teachers from both schools would thoroughly chew them out, since Barry was a student of both the knights’

school and magic school.

“Now, let’s get back to practicing ‘Chant’...”

Before I could finish my sentence, a bell rang out, indicating the end of the class.

It seemed we were out of time.



“Big Sister Karina! Over here, darling!”

Clinging to my arm with one hand, Princess Menea waved gleefully with the other.

Sherin was with us, too.

“I say, Satou, whyever are you with Menea?”

“We ran into each other in a ‘Chant’ class,” I responded.

“Eek!”

A tiny cry drew my attention behind me, where Nana had lifted Sherin out of her seat into a tight hug.

“Master, who is this larva? I inquire.”

“That’s Sir Gouen’s daughter.”

After answering her question, I ordered Nana to put Sherin down.

“How was the class?”

“The class was quite boring, I respond.”

“For a swordsmanship class, there was far more emphasis on etiquette than battle.”

Nana and Liza, who’d accompanied Miss Karina to the knights’ school, seemed unimpressed.

“So to mithril adventurers, even the formal swordsmanship style of Shiga Kingdom must seem like mere theatrics, eh?” Princess Menea chuckled.

“...You all have so much talent.”

Sherin looked at everyone with hopeless eyes.

“I do not wish my hard work to be reduced to the word *talent*, I protest.”

“Agreed. Until master educated me, I was no more than your average spear user.”

While I agreed with Nana, I did feel like Liza always had a knack for the spear—her level had just been low at first.

“Is that true?”

“Oh, yes. My father told me I wasn’t suited to be a warrior,” Liza reminisced.

“S-so did mine!” Sherin cried. “U-um...do you think that I can get strong like you, too?”

“Of course. As long as you always hold tight to your desire to become stronger, then you surely will.”

Sherin nodded, looking to me with blazing eyes.

Ah, I guess Liza did say, “Until master educated me”...

“Please make me your apprentice!”

Um, hang on, I don’t know about that...

“Just a moment! Don’t be rash, young lady!”

A voice called out from afar. It was Arisa, approaching with the younger kids and Lulu in tow.

“E-erm, and you are?”

“Master’s super staff leader, honorary knight Arisa Tachibana!”

Arisa had waffled up to the very last moment over whether to take the last name Watari, like her sister, Lulu, or Tachibana, her surname in her previous life, but in the end, she chose the latter.

“Asking to become master’s apprentice out of the blue is like a newborn lizard trying to challenge a full-grown dragon! You should study under someone closer to your own size for now.”

Arisa tugged Lulu’s arm.

“Which is why the best candidate for your first teacher is none other than my big sister, Lulu, who can even send demons flying!”

“A-Arisa? What are you talking about?”

Ignoring Lulu’s confusion, Arisa pressed her toward Sherin.

“I mean, she seems like a sheltered young lady. If we let master or Miss Liza teach her and they go overboard, she could really get hurt.”

“Th-that’s not...”

Lulu started to object, then trailed off.

Liza hadn’t trained that many people, but since she was used to working with the likes of Pochi and Tama, she tended to be extremely rigorous.

“Hmm...”

Although I didn’t see any reason why it had to be a member of our group who trained Sherin, maybe this was a fateful opportunity.

It wouldn’t be so bad to offer a little ray of hope to a girl whose future was likely to be full of hardships because of the situation with her father.

“...Yes, Lulu might be a perfect fit. Would you mind, Lulu?”

“I-if I can be of use, I’ll do my best...”

I confirmed with Lulu before I proceeded.

“Sherin, once Lulu teaches you how to build up stamina, you can learn the basics at the knights’ school.”

It was probably best for her to learn the standard sword style if she wanted to be a knight.

“Thank you. I look forward to working with you, ma’am.”

“R-right! I’ll do my best!”

Sherin bowed her head, and Lulu frantically bobbed her head several times in return.

She’s adorable when she’s nervous.

“You can’t even tell who’s supposed to be the teacher.”

Arisa sighed, and I bopped her on the head before we worked out the details.

In the process, I learned that Sherin was allowed to go only to the royal academy and straight back to the villa, which didn't leave much time for training after class.



“Then I’ll teach you some stretches and stamina-building exercises you can do at home.”

“Y-yes, Miss Lulu!”

Looking embarrassed at being called “Miss Lulu,” Lulu began explaining some simple stretches.

Sherin had even less stamina than I thought: By the time she’d finished a round of stretches under Lulu’s instruction, she was already panting on her hands and knees with exhaustion.

“Wh-why am I so weak...?”

“Don’t worry. Arisa and I used to get out of breath very quickly when we first started, too.”

Lulu gently reassured the teary-eyed Sherin.

“Master, you’re not going to power level that girl?”

“No, she wants to become a knight—a Holy Knight, in fact.”

Power leveling, a method of leveling up a lower-level person by having a much stronger person fight alongside them, was certainly a fast way to improve someone’s stats and help them acquire skills. But from what I’d observed in my party’s growth, the stat increase was based on their current numbers.

If I power leveled Sherin, it was possible that only her level would go up while her physical stats wouldn’t get high enough to become a knight.

“Master, I wish to participate in training the larva as well, I request.”

“Want to help Lulu, then?”

“Yes, master!”

I assigned Nana to be Lulu’s aide so that she could fend off any jerks who might try to harass the pair.

“Shiga Kingdom wasn’t built in a day! Come on—let’s keep trying.”

“Yes, ma’am! I’ll give it my all!”

It looked like Lulu was able to successfully cheer Sherin up.



“I made a new bestie, sir!”

“Tama tooooo?”

Before dinner, Tama and Pochi told us about their exploits at the preschool.

“Why, isn’t that marvelous! What sort of person? Do tell!”

Miss Karina had come back from the royal academy with them.

“Her name is Cyna!”

“She’s like a pretty princeess?”

“Her dad is Mr. Marky Tenten, sir!”

Arisa asked more questions about the girl, and Pochi and Tama were happy to elaborate.

Maybe “Marky” was supposed to be “Marquis”?

Searching my map for a “Cyna” from a marquis family, I got a hit: Cyna Kelten.

According to the noble notes in my Storage, she was the granddaughter of Marquis Kelten, a military minister.

“Her pink frills are too cool for schoooooool?”

“She saved us from some mean bullies, sir.”

“*Oui oui*, she’s very niiice...”

“I’m going to show her my novels soon, sir!”

“And my art, tooooo—?”

It was clear from their excitement that they were getting along well with Miss Cyna.

Since Arisa looked curious, I told her the results of my search.

“That’s great. If they’ve got a marquis’s granddaughter in their court, the other students won’t be stupid enough to pick on them.” Arisa paused. “Although I’m a little concerned about her being from a military minister’s family...”

Well, as long as it meant the girls wouldn't be bullied, that was fine by me.

"Listen."

Mia plunked herself into my lap.

I guess she wants to talk about her day at the academy, too.

"You went to the magic school with Arisa, right?"

"Mm, teacher."

Mia looked smug.

"You met a good teacher?"

I tried to guess what Mia's short statement meant, but she shook her head.

"Teacher." She puffed up her chest again.

At a loss, I turned to Arisa for help.

"She became a teacher."

"...What?"

Didn't she go there for lessons?

"The teacher in charge of our class was the headmaster. Turns out he's a big elf worshipper, and he begged Mia to give a lesson."

"Mm. Intense."

Mia nodded, looking a bit put off.

Sounded like the headmaster was a pretty unusual person.

"So Mia tried teaching, but since she explained in her usual way, no one could keep up."

"Mrrr. Slow."

I was sure she either explained in one-word sentences or went off on one of her rare lengthy rants.

"And so it fell on your beloved Arisa's shoulders..."

Arisa slipped the strap of her dress to one side and started to strike a weird pose, so I smacked her lightly on the head to get her to keep talking.

“...to be Mia’s interpreter, of course.”

“Skillful.”

Mia nodded approval.

“And I guess people liked the class, because the headmaster asked Mia and me to be teachers, at least for the course of the special classes.”

“Naturally.”

Arisa scratched the back of her head in a show of sheepishness, saying things like, “Oh dear,” and, “I’m so talented, it’s almost scary!” She was joking around, but I had to agree.

“That’s all right, isn’t it? It won’t affect my advising at the Echigoya Company or helping Miss Nina.”

“Yeah, of course. Just remember not to teach them anything dangerous.”

I didn’t want us to get in trouble for leaking secret information we’d learned in the elf village.

“Obviously! Even I know that much.”

“Common spells only.”

Arisa and Mia nodded. I guess I didn’t need to warn them.

“All we said in class was the kind of thing you’d find in Jibby’s dictionary.”

The example Arisa referred to was Professor Jibcloud’s dictionary of magic terms, a textbook we found in the royal academy library. It was a great book with even more details than the notes of Trazayuya the elf sage that I carried in Storage.

“Teaching was certainly fun, but I enjoyed the magic power measurements and magic shooting-range test before that, too.”

“Mm. New record.”

“Wow, that’s amazing.”

I was afraid to ask what kind of record they’d set.

“We accidentally broke the measuring device they use for new students by

overloading it. They had to get an original magic-power-measuring device made by the ancestral king from the royal castle to test us.”

Magic-power-measurement devices gauged a user’s magic power by lighting up star crystals on the device. The number of them determined the user’s rank: Newbies were usually one or two stars, even teachers were three stars, and only the headmaster and some senior staff of the magic school had four stars.

“Five stars.”

“I got four stars, which I’m guessing is for having more than 500 MP? Mia has about fifty percent more MP than I do, so five stars must be more than 1,000 MP.”

Mia puffed up her chest proudly as Arisa explained the details.

“And then, and then!”

They dominated at the magic shooting range, too, Arisa said; she boggled the professor’s mind by shooting all ten targets in one go with the Fire Magic spell Multiple Fire Dance, while Mia shot the teacher’s Earth Magic-made iron golem full of holes using her Water Magic spell Splash Needle.

“Yep, we really got our fill of all the magic-school-setting goodness...”

“Mm, satisfied.”

Arisa and Mia looked thoroughly pleased.

I was glad they were enjoying their school life, as long as they weren’t going too crazy overboard.

“And Karinaaa—?”

“I wanna hear about the night-night acky-demmy, sir!”

Tama and Pochi turned the spotlight on Karina, who’d been listening to everyone else’s tales of glory.



Pochi was probably trying to say *knights' academy*. If I remembered right, that was where Karina went along with Liza and Nana.

"I-I'm afraid it didn't quite suit me, if you must know."

Karina looked away in a huff.

Since she didn't seem to want to talk about it, I beckoned to Liza and quietly asked her what had happened.

"The swords..."

That was all I needed to hear.

Just like at the explorers' academy in Labyrinth City, her Raka-assisted superhuman strength had snapped multiple swords.

The rest of the group looked at Karina affectionately.

"I—I only broke three, I say! The rest of them just got chipped or bent a little!"

It sounded like she'd ruined a lot more than three swords, then.

"Karina, have some sweets, sir."

Pochi patted Karina on the shoulder.

"When something bad happens, you just gotta eat lots of yummy food, sir."

"Have some jerky, toooo?"

"Pochi... Tama... Thank you both ever so much!"

Miss Karina hugged them tightly and stuffed her cheeks with cookies and jerky.

As I watched the three friends snacking away, I had them all tell me more about the academy. Hikaru came back in the middle of all this and joined in on the fun chatter, too. The stories kept coming all the way until dinnertime.

As for the delay-runes lecture I attended with Princess Sistina the next day, all the content after the basic explanation was so advanced that many students dropped out partway through. I came thoroughly prepared, however, and managed to learn most of the necessary information. I planned to try

incorporating it into a spell of some kind soon.

Arisa and Mia wanted to attend, too, but the lecture hall was full beyond standing room to the point of overflowing out of the classroom. I stopped Princess Sistina from invoking her royal privileges to get them in, since there were more than a few people who seemed to have lined up overnight to view the lecture.

I parted ways with the princess at the school and went to the parents' day at Tama and Pochi's class, watched Lulu helping young noblewomen in a cooking class at the ladies' school, and so on.

When I got back, I heard from Arisa that during a joint magic demonstration with the Shiga Thirty-Three Staves, the Sakura Protector Athena challenged Mia to a showdown, only to lose so badly that she ended up in tears.

"I think you went a little overboard there."

"Mm. Regret."

Arisa was cackling, while Mia nodded gravely.

There wasn't much she could do, since their levels were so different. Hopefully, Athena would keep trying to catch up without letting that discourage her.

Gourmet Luncheon

Satou here. You see a lot of food-themed travel and variety shows on TV. Watching a reporter enjoy a meal makes you want to start looking the place up and planning a trip, even though you have no time to go there, don't you think?

"Thank you for gathering at this private luncheon today, everyone."

The prime minister jovially greeted everyone from the seat of honor.

I was one of twelve or so people gathered in a dining hall of the royal castle.

My seat was close to the prime minister's. Maybe it was based on peerage titles; aside from the prime minister himself, most of the people here didn't seem to have very high ranks.

"Today, I've selected primarily dishes from the southwest, especially Blybrogha Kingdom. By enjoying their cuisine, I hope that we can deepen our friendship with their delegation."

Checking the materials I had in Storage, I learned that Blybrogha Kingdom was a small nation governed by leprechauns in the southwest part of the continent. The line we saw when we arrived at the royal capital was a delegation from that kingdom.

"For the appetizer, we have Ukeu shrimp salad with leprechaun sauce."

The butler serving the meal explained its contents as he placed it before us.

Our first dish was a salad topped with boiled shrimp.

I was cautious going in, since the gourmet-loving duo of Marquis Lloyd and Count Hohen had warned me that the prime minister's dinner parties usually consisted of bizarre dishes that were "gourmet" in name only, but evidently I had nothing to worry about.

But just as I took my first bite of what I assumed was a perfectly normal salad,

I was bowled over by the oddity of the dressing.

What I thought was an ordinary salad dressing was in fact a clear honey-based sauce...

It actually worked strangely well with the shrimp and ended up tasting quite good. Still, because it had looked so deceptively ordinary, it was a bit of a shock to the system.

“Mmmgh!”

“What the—?!”

Most of the other attendees seemed similarly taken aback.

“Mm-hmm. Delicious.”

Even though the prime minister was eating with a straight face, I knew him well enough from the time I’d spent with him as Nanashi to recognize that he was definitely enjoying our startled reactions.

“The second dish is a leprechaun bean-based cold soup.”

Next up was a silky-smooth white soup.

It smelled like corn soup, but I knew better than to let my guard down.

Learning my lesson from the first dish, I tasted only a tiny drop— *Gah! That’s sour!*

While the aftertaste wasn’t bad, it would be a tough sell for anyone who disliked sour tastes.

Sure enough, one of the officials seated farther down the table in my row ran out of the room, hands clutched to his mouth.

“One dropout already, eh...?”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up on a murmur from the prime minister as he delicately sipped his soup.

Apparently, it was commonplace at these dinner parties for people to drop out if the food didn’t suit their tastes.

“Are you enjoying this foreign cuisine?” the prime minister asked me when

our eyes met.

“Yes, it’s quite shockingly delicious.”

I meant this sincerely, not just as lip service.

Hopefully, after the luncheon, I could meet up with the cook and ask how some of these dishes were prepared.

“Indeed. Well, there is plenty more yet to come. Please enjoy to your heart’s content.”

The mischievous prime minister’s surprise-laden menu produced a few more dropouts as it continued.

Though all the dishes had appearances that belied their taste, they were still delicious, so I wasn’t complaining.

I kept up inoffensive responses to the prime minister’s topics of conversation as I enjoyed the culinary tour de force.

And soon...

“Here is today’s main dish, whole-roasted Blybrogha giant hornworm monster.”

The main dish was a roasted caterpillar the size of a piglet.

Its appearance alone drove two of the brave remaining warriors to drop out on the spot.

Five remained, including myself and the prime minister. Two of them were so pale that they looked like they might faint at any moment.

“What a delicious scent.”

Really, it smelled like teriyaki pork.

I said it in an attempt to keep the peace in the room, yet the two pale-looking diners gaped at me in disbelief.

Meanwhile, the servers went about their business completely unruffled, evidently accustomed to this atmosphere.

They sliced up the hornworm’s hide and arranged the pieces appealingly on

the plate, topping it with the thick goo from the insides like a sauce. The bizarre, unnatural hue of the sauce made for a rather vivid picture.

“I—I can’t take anymooooore!”

With a loud clatter, one of the pale attendees fled the dining hall.

The other had simply fainted in his chair. I guess the sight and colors of the innards being used as topping was too much to bear.

Wouldn’t it have been better to plate the food before serving it? I suppose that was part of the prime minister’s mischief.

Still, when I’d first arrived in this world, I was reluctant to try even spit-roasted frog meat. I’d come a long way, if I did say so myself. After all the monster-based dishes I’d eaten on our travels and in labyrinths, this sort of thing hardly fazed me at all.

Besides, I’m sure this will be delicious, too.

I’m putting my trust in your taste buds, Prime Minister.

Steeling myself, I followed the waitstaff’s demonstration to cut a bite-size piece of hide and mix it with the sauce before putting it in my mouth.

...Wow, that’s good.

The crispy outer skin and the juicy interior made for an enjoyable texture.

Its sweet-and-sour sauce was delicious, too. If you could just do something about its appearance, this dish had the potential to be the next big craze in the royal capital.

“...You pass.”

The prime minister said something rather ominous.

His gaze was fixed right on me.

“He does seem more than qualified.”

“Indeed. Unlike the nobles who eat things in silence whether they’re delicious or awful, he genuinely seems to enjoy each bite. Magnificent.”

According to my AR display, the surly-faced man sitting across from me was

the minister of foreign affairs.

“Viscount Pendragon, you are aware that a delegation from Blybrogha Kingdom is visiting at present, correct?”

“Yes, I have heard,” I responded.

“This evening, we are hosting a banquet for the delegation. We would like you to attend.”

“Apologies. Blybrogha Kingdom cuisine can be quite unusual, as you have seen. There are few here who can eat it with the appearance of enjoyment, even within our ministry of foreign affairs.”

Ahhh, so the gourmet luncheon had also been a test.

While I didn’t mind mingling with bigwigs, trying to avoid any missteps in a diplomatic setting sounded difficult.

I feel bad for the prime minister and all, but I’ll have to decline...

“I’m told that the head chef of the Blybrogha Kingdom royal court is with the delegation and will be preparing a special meal for the occasion.”

“That certainly sounds exciting.”

I changed my tune in a heartbeat.

Even if I visited Blybrogha Kingdom someday, the odds were low that I’d get to taste a special dish prepared by the head chef of the royal court.

I decided to let my appetite win out.

“Yes, I’d be delighted to attend.”

“Excellent. I thought you might say as much.”

The prime minister nodded in satisfaction at my answer.

That’s all well and good, but when is the dessert course coming out?



“Looks like the plan is going smoothly.”

After we ate dessert, I decided to visit the Echigoya Company before the evening’s banquet.

Incidentally, the afternoon's dessert course was a deep-red frozen dessert with an addictive crunchy texture, made from the blood of a Blybrogha fox-dove. Herbs were used to dispel the tang of the blood, making it taste relatively normal.

"Yes, it is! It's all thanks to the products you prepared for us, Lord Kuro."

I listened to the manager's latest report.

The plan in question was our strategy to get wealthy nobles and merchants to drain their reserves of cash so we could win the Prayer Ring at the auction.

"We don't know the precise amount of Duke Ougoch's wealth, but he's bought even more Magic Swords and tools than we expected. Duke Vistall has yet to react strongly to any of the products we've brought in; it's possible he needs those funds to deal with the rebellion. But the wealthy merchants of the royal capital, especially the Ghookuts Company, are binge-shopping like mad!"

I was guessing it was Arisa who had taught her a phrase like *binge-shopping*.

She added that the Earth Magic-made magic gems were proving especially popular with the viceroy's wife of the trade city.

"The biggest threats left to worry about are the royal family, the viceroy of Labyrinth City—Marquis Ashinen—and perhaps Viscount Pendragon."

Oh, hey, that's me.

"Why the Pendragon boy?"

"He is the owner of the Dragonpen Trading Company run by Marquis Ashinen's second son, although they aren't very public about that. We must be cautious of the vast fortune he's said to have acquired on the sugar route, to say nothing of the wealth he's amassed from the labyrinth."

"Vast fortune?"



I didn't think I'd disclosed the treasures I salvaged from shipwrecks to the public...

"Yes, he has given several sailing vessels of various sizes to the Dragonpen Trading Company. He must have an enormous fortune to provide such things."

No, no, those were just ships I'd found adrift or confiscated from pirates that had been sitting in my Storage.

"I see. Well, he owes me a few favors. I'll handle it."

"Thank you, Lord Kuro. If you'll forgive my insolence, Viscount Pendragon and his vassal Lady Tachibana have done a great deal of service to the Echigoya Company..."

"I know. I'll make the arrangements delicately."

The manager bowed her head gratefully.

As stupid as it felt to be making arrangements with myself, that was an annoying necessity of living a double life.

Manager Eluterina and Tifaleeza were trustworthy enough; maybe I could tell them sometime soon that Kuro and Satou were the same person.

"And Marquis Ashinen?"

"Yes, it is difficult to gauge his wealth, as he is the viceroy of Labyrinth City. What's more, he didn't even react to the Magic Swords he once sought so desperately. I believe his goal is—"

"Not the Prayer Ring. Marquis Ashinen wants an elixir. From what I've heard, he needs it to heal his subordinate, the former Count Poputema."

"You're incredible, Lord Kuro!"

I'd found this out from the viceroy directly as Satou.

"Pardon me... Ah, Lord Kuro?"

As she entered the room, a faint smile played across Tifaleeza's lips when she saw me.

"We've just received a letter from His Excellency the prime minister."

I accepted the letter and skimmed it.

“We’ve gotten permission to develop those farming villages and mines.”

I definitely wasn’t expecting the latter to fly so easily. Even if we did get permission, I thought it would take a little longer.

“But both of them are only tax-exempt for five years...”

“Is that a problem?”

“Yes, at least for the mines, five years doesn’t seem like enough time.”

She explained that when developing a mine in the middle of monster-infested mountains, it was standard to be tax-exempt for ten years at least.

“It’s fine. As long as we have enough people, we can get it up and running within a month’s time.”

With my magic, I could prepare a mine in a matter of days. At worst, getting the drainage and elevator systems in place would be a bit of a pain.

“A—a month?”

The manager’s eyes widened.

“Lord Kuro can do anything,” Tifaleeza murmured, then moved on to the topic of work. “I’ll begin recruiting workers for the farming villages and mines at once, then.”

“Good. Use the same qualifications we discussed before, please.”

“Understood.”

Tifaleeza walked briskly out of the room.

It was great how fast she worked, even if she didn’t need to flatter me so much in the process.

“...I’d almost forgotten.”

Tifaleeza rushed back into the room, cheeks slightly pink.

“The boy who made that fire-starting tool, Aoi Haruka, is here.”

“Oh? You managed to hire him?”

“Yes, that part was no problem.”

Tifaleeza nodded, her silver bob-cut hair swaying.

“That part? There’s some other problem, then?”

“He requested to meet you personally, Lord Kuro.”

Huh, I wonder what he wants.

“All right. I’ll meet with him.”

Most of my business at the Echigoya Company was done for the day, and I still had time before the banquet.

It couldn’t hurt to spend a little of it on this Aoi kid.



“Lord Kuro, that’s it over there.”

Aoi pointed at a dilapidated building.

Once I met with him, he said he wanted to introduce me to someone and brought me to a small workshop district in the working-class part of town. It was only a few blocks away from the slums.

“It’s gotten a lot better around here, you know.”

Aoi spoke up defensively, as if sensing what I was thinking.

“Has it?”

“Yes, there aren’t people collapsing in the street anymore thanks to the increase in free food offerings from the Echigoya Company. Plus, they’re willing to hire people from around here for sewing and side jobs and stuff, so the professor says there aren’t as many girls selling their bodies on the streets anymore.”

“Glad to hear it.”

It’s not as if I started these practices with such lofty goals, but I was happy to hear they were helping to improve people’s lives.

“I’m gonna be Phantom Pippin!”

“Awww, but Pippin’s a master of disguise. I’d be a way better fit!”

“Too bad. You’re too slow to play someone who’s famous for bein’ light on his feet!”

“I’ll be Shadow Thief Sharururuun!”

A group of kids ran around playing nearby.

“You think you’ve got the looks to be a pretty shadow thief?”

“Don’t be mean! Besides, it’s not like you look like a shivvy-lus phantom, either.”

“Looks don’t got nothin’ to do with that.”

From the sound of things, they were pretending to be famous phantom thieves.

“Shivvy-lus... Chivalrous, is it?”

“Yes, supposedly Pippin the Phantom steals from evil merchants and nobles and gives the money to the poor.”

Aoi explained to me in a low voice.

“It doesn’t sound like you think he’s chivalrous.”

“No, I don’t. It’s wrong to give people money that you got by committing crimes. If you want to help people, you should earn money honestly or create jobs for them.”

It’s good to be honest, but this kid’s so honest, he might have a hard time in life.

“Right. Anyway, is this really the workshop?”

“Ah-ha-ha, I know. It looks abandoned, right?”

The building before us appeared as though it might fall apart at any minute.

“Professor! You here, Professor?”

Aoi banged on the door and shouted, but there was no response.

We were here so I could meet this professor of his.

“Maybe he’s sleeping?”

There was a light on my radar indicating a person inside.

Using my Practical Magic spell See Through, I found that it was only a latch keeping the door in place, so I slipped it open with Magic Hand.

“It’s open.”

“Huh? Oh, hey, you’re right... Professor! It’s Aoi. I’m coming in.”

Aoi carefully avoided the rubbish and papers scattered all over the floor as he headed farther inside.

As I followed him, one of the papers on the floor caught my eye. It was a plan for coaxial skypower engines like the ones I’d built, albeit with different circuits and theories.

“Lord Kuro! This is Professor Jahado.”

“It’s good to meet you, Professor. I’ve admired your work for quite some time.”

“Hmph, don’t try to butter me up.”

The old man who emerged wore comically thick glasses and had white hair still rumpled from sleep. Aside from being short-statured, there wasn’t much to distinguish him from the average human being.

I’d first learned of him in materials I found in Sedum City, then read his writings in the old capital. Rumored to be a rotation-obsessed old mage, he was someone I’d always wanted to meet.

In order to prove that I wasn’t just flattering him, I produced some of his writings and a magic top, known as a rolling disc, from my Item Box.

“Huh. Guess you weren’t lying.”

Professor Jahado harrumphed.

Although he acted unimpressed, his attitude changed from that point on.

“Well, have a seat, then.”

I sipped on some herbal tea that Aoi had poured for us as I listened to Professor Jahado’s tale.

He had once worked at the royal academy and royal research institute, but a researcher from a pedigreed noble family used his connections to steal both seats from him.

These days, he had no patrons to his name and eked out a living in the poorer part of town repairing magic tools.

My invitation for him to become a researcher at the Echigoya Company failed to impress him, though.

“Hmph, I don’t care about the money. If you want to hire me, let’s see one of those skypower engines from the new airships! I’d sell my soul to a demon lord if I could see the marvel of that coaxial design up close.”

“You swear?”

“I swear.”

I used Magic Hand to clear space in a corner of the workshop, then produced a small airship’s coaxial skypower engine from my Storage. It would’ve been too big to take out of the Item Box.

“I-it can’t be!”

I smiled as Professor Jahado’s eyes practically popped out of his head.

“If you’ll become a researcher at the Echigoya Company, you can do whatever you’d like with this.”

“E-even take it apart?”

I nodded and handed him a toolbox.

He was so excited that he fumbled the tools a few times, but that didn’t stop him from nimbly and expertly beginning to dismantle the engine.

“Then we have a deal?”

“Looks like it.” Aoi nodded.

I contacted the site of the Echigoya Company shipyard to prepare an area for a research institute.

Later, I planned to use Stone Object and Create House to set up a lab for him.

“Hrrrgh, this is heavy. Help me out, Aoi!”

“Yes, Professor!”

Aoi scrambled to assist the old man with dismantling the engine.

“Wah-ha-ha, so *that’s* how this mechanism works! But if you added the structure I designed a while back, it’d work thirty percent better. And this bearing is too old-fashioned. Grrr, to think they’d come up with such a contraption! Fascinating! This is fascinating!”

Professor Jahado took out the coaxial disc and began examining it from various angles.

“I look forward to what you come up with, Professor.”

With that, I left his workshop behind.

I had no doubt that his help would bring the skypower engine to an even higher level of performance.



“<The treasure of our homeland is missing, lass!>”

Just as I came back to the royal castle for the evening banquet, I heard something alarming in the hallway.

Taking a peek, I saw a leprechaun boy accusing a maid of theft.

He had bronze skin, wore a gaudy white outfit, and was draped in over-the-top accessories to match. This must be one of the members of the Blybrogha Kingdom delegation the prime minister had mentioned—and an important one, too, judging by his outfit.

According to my AR display, the boy was in fact from the Blybrogha Kingdom royal family. He was actually 365 years old, fitting of a long-lived fairy race; it would probably be best not to treat him like a kid.

“E-erm, I’m terribly sorry, but I don’t understand your language...”

“<Ach! I’m getting nowhere with ye! Where’s my interpreter, Ryga?!>”

Evidently, their interpreter was missing, and he and his convoy spoke only fairy language.

Their language was an upward-compatible version of the Elvish language, essentially a common language among all fairy races, which meant I could understand it without a problem. It was basically a simpler version of the elegant words spoken by the elves.

Checking my log, I saw that I'd acquired the "Fairy Language" skill. There was probably no need to activate that when I could already understand it using the "Elvish Language" skill, though.

"<Is there a problem?>"

"<Oh-ho! Ye speak Elvish, do ye? Well, our Dragon's Eye has been stolen from my room!>"

The boy switched from "Fairy Language" to "Elvish Language" to speak to me.

"<Is it a gemstone of some kind?>"

"<Ach, no! The Dragon's Eye is a magical orb that's been handed down in the royal family for generations. It gives the holder an all-seeing eye of judgment that can pierce through anything under the sun.>"

That sounded pretty useful.

Collecting myself, I relayed his words to the maid.

"A theft in the royal castle?!"

The maid rushed off in a panic to call for the guards.

I told the boy that the search was soon to be underway, then took it upon myself to search the map for the Dragon's Eye.

Aha.

It was closer than I expected.

"<Aah, I cannae go home to Mother if I've lost the family treasure...>"

"<Please don't worry. I promise we'll get it back for you.>"

I already found it, after all.

"<Oh-ho, do ye mean it?!>"

"<Yes, just leave it to me.>"

With that, I opened the hallway window and hopped outside.

“Eeeek!”

“Wh-who are you?!”

“I-I’ll call the imperial knights!”

When I pushed my way through the hedges into the courtyard, three maids saw me and shrieked.

I used a little “Blink” to get up close to the first one who screamed.

Because she was the culprit who’d stolen the Dragon’s Eye.

“Wh-what the—?”

The maid jumped back to avoid my light chop with the side of my hand.

This way, she wouldn’t take the other maids hostage.

“How did you find out that I’m Shadow Thief Sharururuun?”

“Shadow Thief?”

“Nyuna is Sharururuun?”

The real maids gasped as they heard the thief identify herself.

“Well, you won’t catch me.”

With a flash of the thief’s arm, fabric filled my vision.

I pushed aside the fabric—a royal maid’s uniform—and saw that the area was covered in smoke. She must’ve used a smoke bomb.

The thief was already on the run. She wore a plain, tight-fitting outfit of shirt and trousers, probably hidden under the maid uniform all along.

“Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho! Catch me if you caaan!”

Her voice cackled in the distance.

Leaving the coughing maids in the smoke, I used “Blink” to chase the girl along the side of the building.

“Grrr, are you a high-level knight?!”

She gave up on escaping on the ground, instead launching back and forth

between a nearby tree and the wall to flee upward.

I maintained my running speed to sprint straight up the wall like something out of a manga.

> Skill Acquired: “Wallrunning”

> Title Acquired: Defier of Gravity

Even though I’d run up walls plenty of times before, for some reason I acquired a skill this time.

I caught up to the female thief despite my distraction and tackled her before she could get away.

But it would probably be painful to fall from around a three-story height, so I used “Skysrunning” to produce a platform in midair and jumped off that into a nearby window instead.

“Let go—!”

Since the thief was struggling to escape, I knocked her out with a light jab to the solar plexus.

The Dragon’s Eye in question was hidden in her ample bosom, so I used Magic Hand to take it out.

It wouldn’t be right to go feeling around an unconscious girl’s chest, criminal or not.

“<Well done, knight of the Shiga Kingdom!>”

The leprechaun boy came running over.

There was a large crowd of people behind him, including the prime minister and the minister of foreign affairs.

“<This is it, right?>”

“<Aye! That’s our national treasure, the Dragon’s Eye!>”

The boy carefully held up the rainbow-colored gem.

“<Now I can still face Mother!>”

The Dragon’s Eye looked like a crystal ball around the size of a five-hundred-

yen coin.

“Sir Pendragon, is that woman the thief?”

“I recognize that face. She’s a maid who works at this guesthouse.”

The prime minister and the military minister peered at the thief.

“No, she’s not.”

With that, I peeled away the mask that covered her face.

Unlike the magical disguise masks I used to become Nanashi or Kuro, it was some kind of one-use-only mask made using a specially alchemized cream.

“A woman, a master of disguise... This must be Shadow Thief Sharururuun.”

“So it would seem.”

She’d said as much herself, and my AR display confirmed it.

“I don’t know how she infiltrated the royal castle, but her luck ran out when she came into contact with you, Sir Pendragon.”

For some reason, the prime minister seemed smug.

I handed Shadow Thief Sharururuun over to the imperial knights who’d arrived with the prime minister. This was after tying her up thoroughly so she wouldn’t escape on the way, of course.

“<I cannae thank ye enough, lad. As Eighth Prince Smartith of the Blybrogha Kingdom, I grant ye the position of Merrymaker and the honor of calling yeself a Blybrogha free knight!>”

“<Oh-ho, Sir Smartith, generous with the rewards as always.>”

Even though I didn’t want any new positions or titles, the prime minister moved things right along.

He explained to me later that Merrymaker was a sort of honorary noble rank given to a foreigner who did a good deed, while a free knight was like a peace officer with relatively free rein within the Blybrogha Kingdom.

“<A Merrymaker is even granted the right to one prank per day. ’Tis a wonderful honor.>”

"<That's amazing...I think?>"

"<Indeed it is.>"

The boy—or rather, Prince Smartith—flared his nostrils with pride.

Well, it didn't seem to give me any rights or duties unless I entered Blybrogha Kingdom, so it was probably nothing to worry about. It was probably less important than the Liquor Marquis title I got in the Kingdom of Sorcery Lalagi.

"<Now then, to the banquet! I shall grant ye the privilege of sitting at my side.>"

"<You do me too great an honor.>"

The jovial prince latched on to my arm and led me toward the dining hall.

"He's already getting along with that hard-to-please prince."

"I confess I'd hoped he would improve the prince's mood at the banquet, but I never dreamed it would be before the banquet even started."

"It's no wonder he was able to smooth things over between Lloyd and Hohen."

I heard the minister of foreign affairs and the prime minister murmuring behind us.

Although I kind of felt like I was being used for their diplomatic purposes, I didn't mind, since it wouldn't do me any harm.

The banquet dishes were similar to the ones at the gourmet luncheon earlier that day. They were even more delicious, though, making for a wonderful meal.

Maybe they tasted extra good to me because I'd been going to all kinds of tea parties and banquets since the New Year began and was getting a little sick of the local cuisine.

After a few more semi-eventful days like this one, the auction was only a few days away.



"Fuh-fuh-field triiip...?"

“Tra-la-laaa, sir.”

Tama and Pochi beat out a rhythm as they spread the contents of their rucksacks on the carpet.

The preschool spring-term class was going on a one-night field trip the following day.

“And you’re going with the knights’ school?”

“Yes, Arisa.”

“Sherin and her class are going along for field training, too.”

They were traveling by carriage to a cabin, which they would use as a base to hike the nearby mountain.

Nana and Lulu had gotten information about the trip from Gouen’s daughter Sherin, since they were helping her with her stamina training.

“Huh. If it’s a bunch of rich kids going hiking, I take it they’ve already cleared the mountain of monsters?”

“Yeah, looks like it.”

Checking the map, I didn’t see a single monster from the fort at the peak down to the vicinity of the cabin.

There was a deep valley on one side of the fort, the other side of which appeared to be monster territory.

From what I could tell from the map, the kingdom army stationed at the mountain fort regularly patrolled the border to ensure that monsters didn’t get in from the other side.

“Field training? So they’re going on the field trip, too?”

“Sherin is on larvae-guarding duty, I report.”

“There are two groups: one to guard the students from the preschool spring class and one to transport supplies to the fort.”

Nana and Lulu responded to Arisa’s question.

They said that Sherin was even tenser than usual about the trip, as the

students' performance would determine whether they got a recommendation for the knights' school.

"But even if there are no monsters, there are still animals, right?"

"Arisa's concerns are correct, I agree."

"It's all right," Lulu said reassuringly. "Each team will be accompanied by teachers and upperclassmen from the knights' school."

She'd heard this from Mr. Heim when he came to pick up Sherin.

"Emergency jerkyyy—?"

"We need hard biscuits, too, sir!"

"You really need emergency rations for a field trip?"

From the amount of food they were bringing, you'd think the trip was about two weeks long.

"Cyna said to bring lots of supplies just in case and to suspect the unsuspected, sir."

"That's the military minister's granddaughter, right?"

"Oui oooui?"

Tama nodded.

"Worrywart."

"That's not true, sir. Cyna is really, really smart, so I'm sure we'll need these supplies, sir!"

"You and Cyna seem very close."

"We're besties, sir!"

"Tama toooo?"

It sounded like they were getting along well at the preschool.

Maybe I should have them invite Cyna over for a nice feast sometime.

"That's all well and good...but everything isn't going to fit in your bag."

"Omigood?"

“We just gotta push it all in, sir!”

Pochi attempted to shove all the supplies into her rucksack, which was already full to bursting with less than half inside.

“P-Pochi, your bag’s going to rip...”

“Just put the emergency rations in your Fairy Pack. As long as it’s just a normal field trip, you’re not going to need those anyway.”

As Lulu hurried to stop them, Arisa offered a sensible solution.

“But the teacher said we gotta fit all our stuff into one rucksack, sir.”

“Why not put your Fairy Pack inside the rucksack, then?”

“Très bieeeen?”

“You’re so smart, Arisa, sir! Pochi never even thought of that, sir!”

Arisa winced a little as Tama and Pochi praised her.

Well, that solves one problem anyway.

“Did you make you-know-what for them, master?”

“Yeah, they’re right here.”

I pulled out two canteens with shoulder straps. The kind with the lid that worked as a cup, of course.

“Perfect! You can’t go on a field trip without one of these babies!”

“Tama’s lid is piiink...?”

“Pochi’s lid is yellow, sir!”

Arisa handed the bottles to each of them.

There was a water stone inside each one, allowing them to produce infinite water if supplied with magic power.

They probably wouldn’t need these, since it was a short enough trip that even the children could make it in one day. Still, better safe than sorry.

“Now you just need snacks.”

“Pochi wants meat, sir!”

“Tama toooo?”

“Nah, there’ll be meat in your box lunches. A snack is something like candy or crackers.”

“Pochi knows about this, sir! A banana doesn’t count as a snack, sir!”

“You’re getting too powerful, Pochi.” Beaten to the punch on her own setup, Arisa gnawed on a strand of hair and muttered to herself.

Pochi clearly remembered the Japanese joke Arisa had taught her way back when we were hunting a floormaster in the labyrinth.

“Tama, Pochi, what kind of snacks would you like?” Lulu asked instead.

“Tama wants potato chiiips?”

“Pochi wants cake, sir!”

As delicious as that sounds, neither of those is suited for a field trip.

“I’ll bring out what we have for you to choose from, okay?”

“Yaaay!”

“Amazingly amazing, sir!”

I took out some field trip–appropriate snacks from Storage by way of the Item Box and lined them up on the table.

Tama’s eyes sparkled, while Pochi’s tail wagged so hard, it looked like it might fly right off.

“Just a second, you two! You can only bring three hundred yen’s worth of snacks!”

“Three hundred yeeen...?”

“How many copper coins is a yen, sir?”

Arisa’s attempt at a joke fell flat due to the currency difference.

“Can’t they bring as much as they want? It’s not like the school set a limit on it.”

If they had extras, they could always share with friends.

“No, that won’t do! Narrowing down your snack selection is part of the fun of a field trip!”

“Gotcha...”

I could sort of see her point. A lot of my classmates used to stress about whether to go for quantity or quality in the snack department.

“Then, instead of a price, how about we limit it to whatever snacks will fit in these bags?”

I pulled out some of the pouches I used for donating gold coins.

“I guess it’s fine. The fancy fabric’s a little excessive, but at least it won’t break.”

Once the bags passed Arisa’s inspection, I handed them to Pochi and Tama.

“Weeeh, this is such a hard choice, sir!”

“Tama wants this and this and thiiis...?”

While Pochi dithered in distress, Tama picked out snacks on instinct and put them in her pouch.

“Dooone?”

“Ooh, you’re so confident, sir...”

Pochi gazed enviously at Tama’s completed snack pack, then began experimenting with which combination would work best.

“Pochi, if you pack it that tightly, aren’t the cookies going to break?”

“It’ll be okay, sir! Pochi believes in Mr. Cookies, sir.”

Sure enough, the cookies crumbled.

“If you keep packing it in like that, the contents will get crushed, I advise.”

“I-it’s fine, sir. Chaos adds to the flavor, sir!”

Even Nana’s warning couldn’t stop the force of chaos.

“Pochi, I get that you’re packing it with tough stuff like hard crackers and candy, but isn’t that a bit too stuffed?”

“Not at all, sir. If I try hard enough, I can fit one more, sir!”

“Mrrr, reckless.”

Just as Arisa and Mia feared, Pochi’s bag tore open.

“Pochi, you mustn’t waste food or perfectly good pouches! If you keep it up, you’re going on that field trip with no snacks at all.”

Finally, Liza snapped and scolded Pochi.

With her tail between her legs, Pochi apologized and finally packed a new bag with a random assortment of snacks.

“As for the broken cookies, crushed dried fruits, and dropped hard candies, the staff ate them up later, and we all lived happily ever after.”

Arisa yawned as she went off on some absurd narration. Clearly it was time for bed.

“We should get to sleep. The field trip departs bright and early tomorrow.”

Everyone headed toward the bedroom.

“Pochi’s not sleepy yet, sir.”

“Tama eitherrr?”

They were both showing the classic reaction of a child the night before a field trip.

“If you don’t hurry up and sleep, you’ll miss the wake-up time tomorrow, and they’ll leave without you.”

“Nyuuu!”

“That would be terrible, sir!”

Liza’s gentle rebuke sent Tama and Pochi diving into bed.

They kept wriggling and whispering for quite a while, but by midnight, they were both sound asleep.

As fun as it would be to chaperone their field trip, the auction was coming up soon. I decided it was best to take care of the rest of my business in the royal capital as soon as possible.

I tucked Pochi and Tama under the covers before going to sleep myself.

Interlude: Maneuvers

“Gouen’s daughter is leaving the royal capital.”

Deep in the slums, inside a near-collapsing building found within a complex maze of alleyways, a small group of men knelt in a circle.

“Are you certain?”

“Yes, without a doubt. She’s going on the royal academy’s spring field expedition.”

“That sounds awfully careless.”

“Don’t underestimate the kingdom. Most likely...”

“It’s a trap, I know.”

“Indeed. They wish to lure us out of the city.”

These men were the last of the group who’d plotted Duke Vistall’s assassination. They were hiding out in the royal capital, hoping to kill the duke before he could follow the anti-rebellion army back to his territory.

“But if we take his daughter hostage, we can force Gouen to act.”

“The Screws we have on hand aren’t enough to rid us of the Shiga Eight guarding the duke. I suppose this is our best chance at finishing him off once and for all...”

The monster-controlling Screws they had acquired from the Weaselman Empire had their limits. They didn’t work on monsters that were too high-level and required enough man power to wedge the Screw into a monster to control it.

“On top of that, I have it on good authority that Marquis Kelten’s granddaughter is going on this expedition, too.”

“If we manage to kidnap her, we could surely dull the blade of the royal

army.”

The men smirked.

“But how are we to do that?”

“We draw away her escorts, plunge the guardians into chaos, and make an opening.”

The man glanced at the Screw in the corner of the room.

“I’ll put you in charge of creating the chaos. My subordinates and I will handle getting rid of the escorts and kidnapping the girl. As for where to take her...”

“Leave that to me. I have a few ideas.”

The men divided up their roles, then scattered out of the dilapidated house into the darkness.

Pochi and Tama's Expedition

The royal academy spring field expedition is a tradition that has been carried on for two hundred years. Military engineers release weak monsters into the mountains in advance to test the mettle of students who wish to enroll in the knights' school. The reasoning behind it claims that you can see a person's true colors in times of crisis, but personally I find it barbaric. (Ninth Defense Squad Secretary, Rik Boppan)

"Fuh-fuh-field triiip!"

"Field triiip?"

The gleeful singing of children's voices rang out from within the horse-drawn carriage.

It was part of a long procession of carriages that had left the royal capital early that morning for the town of Mimani, where the royal academy's spring field expedition would take place. Less than half a day's travel away from the royal capital, Mimani was famed as a wellness resort for pedigreed nobles. There were several hunting halls and a disproportionately high number of shops and inns for the town's small size.

"Damn, how are they still going? They've been singing nonstop since the crack of dawn."

"Hey, I'm not complaining. It's better than those kids who gripe about their butts hurting every time the carriage shakes or demand that we stop 'cause they're getting carriage-sick."

"Ha-ha-ha, true. This isn't so bad by comparison."

The escort soldiers disguised as coachmen chatted among themselves.

"Not much to do, though."

"Yeah, well, Marquis Kelten's granddaughter is with them."

“The knights on patrol must’ve put in a lot of extra effort to impress the military minister.”

The older soldier nodded at the younger one’s words.

Clearly the knights had gone a bit overboard: They had yet to see a single rabbit near the road, never mind a bandit or beast.

“It’s better if we don’t have to fight anyway.”

“Yeah, since officially the knights’ school students are supposed to protect the spring field expedition on their own.”

As if taking care of the knights’ school students wasn’t enough, the spring field expedition was dragged down all the more by applicants for the school. On top of that, they even had to guard kids from the preschool.

It was essentially just a hiking trip with all the dangers already removed, but every few years there was a case of a student straying from the path or falling off a ledge. And of course, many students got sick or simply too tired to keep hiking.

If anything, carrying kids who dropped out on the hike was practically the knights’ school students’ primary role.

Eventually, the carriages stopped in the square of a small village at the foot of the mountains, near the town of Mimani.

The students would disembark from the carriages here and break up into two groups: the team heading partway up the mountain through the ruins to deliver supplies to the fortress and the team guarding the prospective students on the trip to Mimani.

The latter would finish out their journey on an easy hike that even the low-stamina preschool kids could manage in half a day.

“Everyone off the carriages! Break up into your groups! Team leaders, once you’ve taken roll call, report back to me!”

The burly teacher barked out orders, sending the knights’ school students briskly breaking into groups in neat lines.

While the prospective students tried to break into teams, too, they were a

clumsy mess compared to the current students who'd been trained in group action. Noticing this, the teacher shouted at them.

"Cadets! Let's see some hustle! Look for your team leader's flag and get moving on the double!"

"Where do we line up, sir?"

"I dunnooo...?"

The preschool students hadn't been given any particular orders, so they were milling around in the area where they'd gotten off the carriages.

"Once their teams are in order, I believe we'll be moving in our carriage groups."

"Cyna, you're so smart, sir."

"Thankeeee?"

It was Marquis Kelten's granddaughter Cyna, whose straight red hair was tied up in a sleek ponytail, who answered Tama's question.

Her mature composure made it hard to believe that she was younger than they were.

"Lady Cyna, my name is Marion, a teacher at the knights' school. I'll be accompanying your team today. Please let me know if you need anything, ma'am."

A young woman who appeared to be a new teacher greeted her stiffly.

"Thank you, Miss Marion. But I'd appreciate it if you treat me the same as any other student, truly."

"Y-yes, of course, ma'am!"

Cyna suppressed a sigh, as her request clearly hadn't quite gotten through.

"I'm Pochi, sir!"

"Tama is Tamaaa?"

Her friends Tama and Pochi, who may or may not have noticed her plight, cheerfully greeted the teacher.

The sight made Cyna break into a smile more fitting for a girl her age.

“Is that her?”

“Must be, if Mari’s over there.”

As a group of smirking boys clad in the armor of knights’ school students approached, Cyna replaced her natural smile with one of artificial politeness.

“Hello again, Lady Cyna. I’m Barry, second son of Baron Zorgon. You may not remember me, but we were introduced at His Excellency Kelten’s reinstatement banquet.”

“Oh yes, I remember.”

Aside from his face and name, all Cyna remembered was that he was a braggart who made terribly dull conversation, but she kept her smile fixed in place as she seethed inwardly.

As a direct descendant of the Kelten family, which stood at the top of the military factions in the royal capital, Cyna had been thoroughly educated from a young age.

“We will be guarding your team today, so you have nothing to be afr—”

“Aah, it’s Sherin, sir!”

Pochi interrupted the smirking boy, Barry.

“Cool armooor?”

“Hello, Pochi and Tama! I didn’t know you were coming on the trip.”

“*Oui oooui?*”

“We’ll share our snacks with you later, sir.”

The daughter of the former Shiga Eight swordsman Mr. Gouen knew Pochi and Tama through Lulu, who was instructing her in building stamina.

“Cadet! Who gave you permission to chitchat? Prepare the luggage for departure.”

“Y-yes, team leader!”

When Barry shouted at her, Sherin hurried over to check the luggage.

The other cadets saw this and joined her in their clumsy attempts at the unfamiliar proceedings.

“Honestly, this year’s cadets are a bunch of good-for-nothings.”

“Is that so...?”

“No they’re not, sir!”

“Sherin works haaard...?”

While Cyna brushed off his comment, Pochi and Tama protested at once.

“Shut up, plebeians!”

Pochi and Tama turned teary-eyed.

“Sir Zorgon, these two are my friends.”

“R-really? Sorry about that, then. You can call me Barry.”

Quailing at Cyna’s cold rebuke, Barry tried to save face.

“And another thing. Tama and Pochi are both honorary knights. They are not plebeians.”

“Nobles? These demi-humans?”

The word *demi-human* in itself wasn’t discriminatory in the Shiga Kingdom, but Barry loaded it with a derisive tone.

“They are animal-eared folk. And you ought to apologize to them.”

“...Apologize? Me?”

“You referred to two noble family heads as ‘plebeians.’ It is only common courtesy, is it not?”

Barry looked perplexed at first until he slowly realized from Cyna’s explanation that he had no choice. “Sorry for calling you plebeians,” he muttered sourly, then excused himself to Cyna and went back to the group of team leaders.

Watching as Barry sharply scolded the team members and prospective students, young Cyna screwed up her face, thinking that perhaps team leaders should be chosen by their level of maturity and not just their skills with swords

or spells.



“Fuh-fuh-field triiip!”

“Fun fun field triiip?”

Walking along the carefully maintained mountain path, Pochi and Tama sang their field trip song.

The knights’ school students walked in tight formation before and behind the preschool course students. The prospective students of the knights’ school were positioned at intervals among them.

The teachers and escort soldiers walked with the preschool students.

“You two are still full of energy, I see.”

“Pochi always has energy, sir!”

“Tama tooooo?”

For two girls over level 50, a particularly high level even in the whole of the Shiga Kingdom, walking on a paved mountain path was no harder than a stroll through town.

Cyna was relatively high-level for her age but still only in the single digits.

The same applied to the knights’ academy students who were there to guard her. Even Barry, the highest level among them, was only level 7.

“You’re falling behind, Cadet Sherin!”

The team leader Barry now shouted at Sherin.

“...Y-yes, sir.”

“If you can’t even make it to the ruins with such a light burden, you’ll be marked a failure for sure.”

“I-I’ll try harder.”

Sherin gritted her teeth and kept walking despite the torrents of sweat.

Even with stamina-building lessons from Lulu and Nana, the young girl still had difficulty carrying some ten pounds of baggage on top of her leather armor

and wooden sword and shield.

“We’ll heeelp...?”

“Have a stamina-recovery potion, sir.”

Tama supported Sherin’s backpack from behind, while Pochi gave her a potion in a small vial.

But Sherin stoutly refused.

“No...if you help me...it wouldn’t be...training...”

“That’s the spiriiit...?”

“You’re such a hard worker, Sherin, sir.”

Hearing her serious tone, Tama and Pochi stopped their meddling.

While keeping an eye on her progress, the pair carried bags for Cyna and some of the other low-stamina children, resuming their enjoyment of the hike.

“It’s the ruins!”

“We finally get to take a break!”

The knights’ school students spotted the ruins beyond the trees.

“Keep it up, kids! It’s just a little farther to the ruins.”

The supervising teacher, Marion, used a voice-amplifying magic tool to call back to the line, eliciting cheers from the children.

Pressing onward through the trees that lined the mountain path, they emerged in front of the ruins of a shrine to the ancestral king Yamato.

After a short break, the current and prospective students of the knights’ school began cleaning up around the ruins.

The preschool spring semester kids weren’t obligated to help, but when Cyna took the lead—the Keltens were loyal to the royal family—the other children followed suit.

“Why, there’s someone here.”

In the midst of her cleaning, Cyna spotted someone deep in the ruins.

“Ooh! It’s Hikaru, sir!”

“Hallooo?”

Pochi ran over, and Tama waved excitedly.

It was none other than Hikaru—who was really the ancestral king Yamato in the flesh, awoken after a long sleep.

“Is this a friend of yours?” Cyna asked.

“Aye!”

Tama nodded.

“Oh? If it isn’t little Tama, Pochi, and...erm, who’s this one?”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. My name is Cyna, of Marquis Kelten’s family.”

“My goodness, how polite. I’m Hikaru. You must be a descendant of Tekkah, right? Uh-huh, you have the same intensely earnest look in your eyes.”

Hikaru returned Cyna’s polite curtsey.

“H-how do you know our family founder’s name?”

“Hmm? Oh, y’know...we go way back.”

Hikaru looked wistful.

“Whatcha dooin’...?”

“Visiting graves,” Hikaru answered Tama.

“Visiting graves, sir?”

“Loyal retainers who helped the ancestral king Yamato found the Shiga Kingdom are buried here, you see.”

Cyna was the one to answer Pochi’s question.

“Yes, such precious friends are resting here...,” Hikaru murmured.

“Group up! We’re moving out!”

Hikaru’s comment was overshadowed by the team leader Barry shouting from outside the ruins.

“Hurry uuup—?”

“We’d better go, sir!”

“Lady Hikaru, please forgive our rudeness, but we must be going.”

Hikaru waved as the children hurried toward the exit.

When they disappeared outside, Hikaru turned back to the graves within the ruins.

Her face in profile wore a mixture of deep sorrow and a longing nostalgia for the past.



“We’re running a little behind.”

“Yeah, at this rate, we’re gonna lose to the team bringing supplies to the fort on the peak.”

At the front of the group headed along the mountain path toward the town of Mimani, the team leader and his vice leader conversed in low voices.

“Guess we have no choice. Should we take the other route?”

“Yeah, that’s probably our best bet.”

“Won’t that be too tough for the cadets and preschool kids?”

“They’ll be fine. It hasn’t rained lately, and if any of the brats can’t walk, we’ll make the commoner students carry them.”

Barry steamrolled over the objection.

“Oh, all right. Those extra points for getting to our destination first are too tempting to pass up. I’m sure the commoners won’t complain.”

“All right, we’re taking a shortcut up ahead!”

With his vice leader’s approval, Barry made an announcement to the rest of the group.

“Now, wait just a minute, Zorgon!”

“What is it, Mari—I mean, Miss Marion?”

Barry narrowly avoided using the students’ nickname for their teacher.

“Don’t you ‘what is it’ me, mister! There was nothing in the itinerary about taking a shortcut!”

“Right, I guess you wouldn’t know, since you’re a new hire, miss. They use this shortcut almost every year, see.”

“B-but—”

“Besides! As team leader, I’m in charge of giving the orders. I thought you were only supposed to take charge in case of an emergency, right?”

“W-well, I suppose so, but...”

Taking advantage of the newbie teacher, Barry convinced her to back down.

In truth, they were allowed to use the shortcut on the summer field expedition since it was only knights’ school students, but the spring field expedition with inexperienced trainees wasn’t supposed to do so.

“Let’s move out!”

“It’s more slippery than the main path. Watch your step!”

Barry yelled orders, and the vice leader added a warning.

“Smells greeeen?”

“Lots of signs of prey, sir.”

Tama and Pochi looked around excitedly.

This game trail appealed to the pair more than the carefully maintained mountain path.

“Is it safe to be traveling on such a rough trail?”

“But of cooourse?”

“We’ll keep everyone safe, sir. I don’t sense any monsters anyway, sir.”

Tama’s and Pochi’s seal of approval brought a smile back to Cyna’s face.

“Come to think of it, I believe my brother did say that they took a shortcut through the woods during his knights’ school summer field expedition, too.”

Cyna’s words helped alleviate some of the other children’s concerned expressions.

Barry's team, on the other hand, was struggling on the trail.

"Dammit, this is harder than I thought."

The game trail was full of twists and turns and occasionally overtaken entirely by weeds. They cut these aside as they proceeded.

If Satou were here, he likely would have pointed out that they had deviated far off course. Unfortunately, they weren't so lucky.

"Hey, Barry. Did you take a wrong turn somewhere?"

"Normally we'd be able to see the creek by now."

"Don't blame me! You there, scout! Go see if the creek is up ahead!"

"Huh? By myself?"

"Just go, dammit! That's an order!"

Barry sent one of the commoner students ahead to scout.

"The brook is that way, sir!" Pochi pointed.

"Don't go making stuff up! That can't be right!"

Barry laughed off Pochi's proclamation.

It couldn't possibly be in that direction, at least according to his mental map.

"Where's the damn scout?!"

It took about half an hour for the scout to return as Barry waited irritably.

"I didn't see a brook anywhere."

The scout looked exhausted, yet Barry and his friends berated him.

"Did you even look?"

"So you kept us waiting for nothing?"

"We must have gone the wrong way last time the path broke off. Let's retrace our steps, Barry."

"Tch. Fine."

Accepting his vice leader's suggestion, Barry brought the team back the way they had come.

Some of the students and children complained or looked nervous, but Barry silenced them with angry shouting.

“Pochi, can you tell which direction the creek is in?”

“That way, sir.”

Pochi sniffed the air and pointed Cyna toward the creek.

“Then it’s safe to assume that we took a wrong turn not at the last place the path broke off but at the one before.”

Cyna relayed this information to Barry by way of Miss Marion, only for him to ignore the advice, leading the party astray on the game trail even as their evening shadows grew longer.

“Meeew?”

“What’s wrong, sir?”

“No bug soounds?”

At Tama’s observation, Pochi listened closely.

“You’re right, sir!” she cried.

One of the nearby knights’ school students sneered at the pair.

“Are you stupid or what? Of course the bugs would stop making noises when we’ve got such a big group trampling around.”

“Whoever calls someone stupid is the one who’s stupid, sir.”

“Shut up, stupid!”

Pochi’s tail rolled up, and she hid behind Cyna.

As strong as she’d become, she still had trouble handling verbal abuse.

“Uh-oooh?”

Tama scrambled up a tree and looked around.

“Hey, you! You can play climbing trees after we get back!”

The same student who’d insulted Pochi yelled at Tama, but she paid no attention to him, preoccupied with a sense of imminent danger.

“Pochi, what’s gotten into Tama?”

“She’s looking out for enemies, sir.”

As Pochi explained to Cyna, Tama deftly slid back down the tree.

“I can’t see ’em, but something’s coming from that waaay?”

Tama pointed in the opposite direction of where the group was headed.

“What is coming exactly?”

“Probably monsters, sir,” Pochi responded to Cyna. “All the bugs on the mountain are scared, sir. There must be lots of monsters coming, sir.”

“O-oh no!”

When Pochi and Tama had said they didn’t hear insect noises, they didn’t just mean in the immediate area—they meant the entire mountain.

Cyna brought Tama and Pochi to relay this serious situation directly to Barry and the others.

“You think there are monsters?”

He looked at Cyna doubtfully, then sighed to his friends with blatant mockery.

“Lady Cyna, this area is perfectly safe. The valley on the other side of the fort may be dangerous, but it’s virtually impossible for any monsters to get past the fort and the barrier posts to come all the way here.”

“But—”

“Besides, even if monsters did appear, you’ve got a dozen future knights on your side. I promise to protect you with my life, Lady Cyna.”

Barry smugly put on the air of a knight in shining armor.

“Monsters! There’s a monster here! It’s alone!”

A cry rang out from the rear of the group.

“Let’s go!”

“You’ve got this, Barry!”

Barry drew his sword and ran toward the monster with his friends.

Tama and Pochi came along, too.

“So the trial this year is a little mantis... Talk about small fry.”

A toddler-size praying mantis—like monster emerged from behind the trees.

Barry seemed to think it was a monster sent by the military engineers as a test at the academy’s behest.

“We’ll heeelp?”

“Pochi will help, too, sir.”

“Outta the way!”

“You don’t need help, sir?”

“If we needed help from brats like you, we could never call ourselves knights!”

“Yeah, if that day ever comes, we’ll become your servants or henchmen or whatever you want!”

“No kidding.”

Barry and his friends jeered at Pochi.

Running up behind them, Cyna frowned indignantly at their rude attitudes.

“Cadet, get these kids out of here!”

“Y-yes, sir!”

Shrinking back from Barry’s shout, Sherin led Tama and Pochi away from the front lines.

“Are they okaaay...?”

Tama looked back worriedly: Barry and his group had yet to land a solid hit on the lone little mantis.

“The knights’ school students and us cadets have the same mission—to get you preschool kids to the town safely.”

If they let a preschool student battle or get hurt, Sherin explained to the pair, they would all fail their mission.

“Faaail...?”

“Yes, I wouldn’t be able to join the knights’ school.”

“Th-that’s not good, sir! Pochi will cheer you on from behind, sir!”

“Tama tooooo?”

Clenching their fists, the two stood by and watched as the knights’ school students fought and eventually defeated the little mantis.

“That thing was tough.”

“I thought it was gonna steal my sword with its scythes.”

The students wiped their brows as they stood over the monster’s corpse.

“There really was a monster, then.”

“Of cooourse...?”

Tama nodded at Cyna.

“But there’s still a bunch more coming, sir.”

“R-really?!”

This alarmed reaction came not from Cyna but from Miss Marion, who’d been watching the students battle.

“Pochi wouldn’t lie, sir.”

“From which direction?”

“Over theeere?”

Tama and Pochi pointed in the direction the little mantis had come from.

“We need to move, everyone! Preschool students, drop your bags and run!”

“Miss Marion, what’s going on?”

“Zorgon, you take the front. Make way to the clearing up ahead!”

“Wh-why?”

Barry seemed unnerved by the teacher’s sudden intensity.

“Do you want to be attacked by a swarm of little mantises in the middle of the

forest?!”

“B-but there can’t be a swarm here. The knights cleared—”

“Little mantises incoming! A bunch of them!”

Just as Barry was protesting that it was impossible, he was interrupted by the voice of a scout who’d run up ahead of his own accord.

“Get moving, Barry!”

“R-right!”

When the teacher commanded Barry by his first name, he automatically started running, and the other students and children did the same.

“It’s dangerous to go alone, sir.”

“We’ll heeelp?”

“Don’t worry about me, girls! Lady Cyna, take these two with you! I can’t use my Wind Rod if they’re in range.”

As Miss Marion shouted desperately, Cyna took Pochi’s and Tama’s hands and led them away.

They broke into a run to match her pace, and Miss Marion followed behind them, using her Wind Rod to scatter the little mantises.

Soon, they were through the forest into the clearing on the mountain slope where the students had gathered.

Miss Marion looked around.

“Up theeere?”

“It’ll be safe on that boulder, sir.”

Tama and Pochi pointed at a large stone monument of some kind in the center of the clearing.

Narrow steps wound up to the top, possibly so it could be used as a lookout platform.

“Get the children to the top of the boulder! Cadets, guard the stairs! Anyone who can use Earth Magic, make walls around the perimeter!”

The children fearfully scrambled up the steps at Marion's command.

Some of them got frozen with fear on the way, making for a slow evacuation.

"Team leader, send up the signal flare!"

"B-but that deducts a ton of points from our grade..."

"Would you rather have your report card displayed on your gravestone? There were at least ten little mantises back there. The entire swarm is probably several times larger."

Miss Marion admonished Barry for still being fixated on his grades in such a situation.

"They're heeere?"

"Lots of them, sir!"

The little mantises emerged from the trees—nearly thirty of them.

"W-waaaaah!"

"Mommy, I'm scaaaared!"

On top of the rock, the preschool children started screaming and sobbing.

This spread to the cadets and even some of the knights' school students.

"It's okaaay?"

"P-please don't cry, sirs."

Tama and Pochi tried to comfort the children, but to no avail.

Even the stouthearted Cyna was too focused on keeping her own composure to worry about calming the others.

"Get it together! You're supposed to be knights in training!"

Even as she scolded the students, Miss Marion's hands and knees were shaking.

Because the swarm of little mantises surging out of the woods was still growing larger.

"We'll make a threefold circle formation to protect the stairs. Knights' school

students on the outside line, cadets on the inner lines.”

The students moved according to Miss Marion’s orders.

Glancing up at the signal flare Barry had finally fired, Miss Marion called out to the students.

“When the soldiers at the fort and in Mimani see the signal flare, they’ll come to save us! All we have to do is make sure everyone survives until then!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Pochi and Tama, who’d been forbidden to fight, could only cheer until their voices were hoarse. Little did Cyna or Miss Marion know that if the pair of them lent a hand, they could wipe out the swarm in a matter of moments.

“Uh-oh! Mari, grab that one!”

“Call me Miss Marion!”

Miss Marion was using her Wind Rod to keep scattering the swarm of little mantises, while at the same time cutting down any monsters that made it through the ring of students with her sword.

“Oh no—!”

“It got through!”

Before Marion could finish off the first one, another little mantis broke through in a different spot and headed for the ring of cadets. She couldn’t use the Wind Rod inside their formation.

“I’ll be right there to help you! Focus on defense and buy time until then.”

Looking pale, the prospective students took on the little mantis.

The ones who swung wildly and missed or backed away in fear were still better off than the ones who stood trembling on the spot. One even swung his sword so wildly that he hurt another cadet instead.

“Gaaah!”

One of the cadets got sent flying by a little mantis, leaving an opening for it to reach the second ring of mostly female cadets.

If it got through this line, the children on the rock would be in danger.

Most of the cadets were frozen in fear.

But one girl still managed to move.

“Lesson from Miss Nana! Always keep your eyes on your opponent!”

Sherin shouted in a shaky voice to give herself courage.

With her small shield, she managed to block the little mantis’s attack.

It was enough to knock her petite frame backward, but it stopped the little mantis’s movements long enough for the other cadets to knock it down.

“Lesson from Miss Lulu! Even if you fall, get right back up!”

Sherin pulled herself unsteadily back to her feet and readied her shield again.

The little mantis had managed to push through the cadets and close in, but Sherin stood firm with her shield, even as her eyes filled with tears.

“Stop them in their tracks, then sweep the legs!”

Sherin used her short sword to sweep the little mantis’s middle legs.

It staggered backward, and the other cadets descended on it, with Miss Marion arriving just in time to deal the finishing blow.

“Huff...huff... Miss Lulu, Miss Nana, I did it...!”

Sherin slumped to the ground as the fear and exhaustion finally caught up to her, but her tear-streaked face was full of pride.

“Très bieeeen?”

“That was really, really great, sir!”

Tama and Pochi praised Sherin’s efforts from the top of the boulder.

With the children’s hard work, the little mantises soon began to retreat.

“Looks like they’re running away scared now.”

“Woooo! We wiiiin!”

Barry and his friends shouted in triumph.

Miss Marion, who’d probably worked hardest of all of them, collapsed onto

her back with exhaustion and relief.

“Wee-woo wee-woo?”

“Nurse Pochi is here, sir!”

Wearing paramedic armbands, Tama and Pochi rushed around to the injured students and cadets, handing out stamina-recovery potions and salt candies for calorie and electrolyte restoration, applying bandages, and so on.

The bandages were soaked with diluted magic potions to effectively stop bleeding and disinfect wounds.

Satou had given them the potions, watered-down versions of his own personal brew, to give out in case of emergencies.

Once they finished the first aid treatments, Tama and Pochi returned to the top of the boulder.

“Damn, they’re running like hell. You can’t even see ’em anymore.”

“Yeah, true...”

As Barry smugly nudged his vice leader, the latter suddenly frowned.

“...Why did they run into a different part of the forest than where they came from?”

“Who knows? Maybe their leader went that way.”

Barry shrugged off the vice leader’s question without a second thought.

“Round twoooo?”

“The second wave is about to arrive, sir.”

Tama and Pochi reported from above.

“Second...?”

Miss Marion looked up to see where Tama and Pochi were pointing, turning toward the direction where the swarm had first appeared.

“S...soldier mantises!”

The teacher screamed as she saw a far more dangerous monster emerge.

Standard military training taught that defeating a soldier mantis required several full-fledged knights or an entire squad of soldiers.

If she truly put her life on the line, Miss Marion could still defeat only one or two at best. Working with the knights' school students, they might be able to bring down four.

But it was eight soldier mantises that appeared from within the woods.

Even if they all evacuated to the top of the boulder, there was no telling how many lives would be lost before reinforcements arrived.

"Maybe it's for the best that I won't live to see how it ends, though..."

Miss Marion sent the cadets to retreat to the top of the rock and kept only the best fighters among the students on the ground, moving the rest to the stairs.

The soldier mantises invaded the clearing, their compound eyes fixating on the students.

Most of them seemed not to regard the students as a threat; all but one went about devouring the corpses of the little mantises.

"Cannibalism...?"

"The little mantises must have been running from them."

A few students whispered among themselves to fend off their fear.

"It's coming! Stay focused!"

The one soldier mantis that didn't take an interest in the corpses charged toward the students.

"Wind, strike my enemy! ...It's not working?!"

The Wind Shot from the teacher's Wind Rod glanced right off the soldier mantis's carapace, slowing it for only a moment before it resumed its charge.

That alone was enough to prove how much more dangerous it was than the little mantises.

"Damn it...!"

Miss Marion slashed at the mantis with her sword to fend it off, but it fearlessly swung its front scythe leg at her.

“Th-the Knight’s Shield!”

The sturdy steel-enforced Knight’s Shield was pierced in a single strike by the mantis’s pickax-like talon, much to the horror of the watching students.

Swiping the impaled shield away with one scythe, it used the other to mow down Miss Marion.

“Gah!”

Marion used her sword to deflect the blow, but the blade bent under the sheer force and was knocked out of her hands. The students screamed as their teacher was sent tumbling across the ground.

“W-we’re in trouble. What do we do, Barry?”

“Huh? What do we do?”

Barry, who was supposed to be the team leader, only repeated the question in a panic.

“Front lines, ready your shields!”

About half of the students obeyed the vice leader’s command.

The other half stammered things like, “B-but they’ll just get ripped up like paper,” and hid behind their comrades.

As the soldier mantis stared down at them, it seemed to Cyna that the monster was sneering.

“Here it comes!”

The soldier mantis trampled the students easily.

No lives had been lost yet, but there were too many bruises, broken bones, and cuts to count.

“W-we’re gonna die. We’re all gonna die...”

Barry cowered behind his friends, his eyes turning hollow.

“Barry! What are your orders? You’re supposed to be team leader!”

“Y-you do it! I’m stepping down as leader. That’s it—I’ll escape while you’re all getting— No, wait. That would look bad. Oh, I know! I’ll get help. I’m not running away. I’m going to report this situation.”

“What the hell are you saying?!”

“I-I’m too important to die here, that’s what!”

The vice leader grabbed Barry’s arm, and Barry knocked him away with his sword.

“You...” The vice leader stared at the blood dripping from his hand. Barry ignored him and ran away as fast as he could.

“W-wait up, Barry...!”

“Take me with you!”

Barry’s hangers-on started running after him, and a few students followed.

The soldier mantises looked their way for a moment but didn’t seem to care enough to chase them.

“Dammit...! We’ll have to protect everyone on our own!”

“Yessir!”

The remaining students looked on the verge of tears as they responded to the vice leader’s shout.

“At this rate, we’ll all be killed...”

Looking down at the battle from atop the boulder, Sherin clenched her fist when she heard Cyna’s whisper.

She ran down the stairs to where the teacher’s bags sat at the boulder’s base and pulled out the voice-amplifying magic tool.

“Guards, I know you’re watching me! Please! Come save everyone!”

But even after Sherin cried out with the magic tool, the watchers in the shadows of the forest didn’t stir.

They were certain that this monster attack was the work of the Vistall Duchy rebels who were after Sherin. Assuming that their goal was to kidnap Sherin

while the monsters kept the group occupied, they were waiting to round up the kidnappers as soon as they appeared. To these men, their mission must be more important than other people's lives.

"Please...someone, anyone, help us..."

Sherin pleaded from the bottom of her heart.

"Okey-dokeeeey?"

"Roger, sir."

Tama and Pochi, who'd followed Sherin down the steps along with Cyna, gave a salute.

They'd apparently been holding back all this time so that Sherin wouldn't get a failing grade.

"Tama! Pochi! You can do that?"

"But of cooourse?"

"Easy-peasy, sir."

Tama and Pochi moved to pull out their swords from their Fairy Packs, only to realize they'd left their rucksacks on top of the rock, and they flailed around in a panic.

Then they picked up some swords dropped by fleeing students and struck a cool pose as if nothing had happened.

"...Are you quite sure you'll be all right?"

"Aye!"

"O-of course, sir!"

The two of them reassured the worried-looking Cyna.

Pochi glanced at Tama tensely.

"Tama, thirty percent, sir."

"Aye."

Tama and Pochi pressed buttons on the power-limiter bracelets they wore on their wrists.

Originally designed so that they could play with children in Labyrinth City without worrying about hurting anyone, these bracelets had gradually become more advanced, to the point where they could be adjusted to four different power levels.

It was in percentages instead of a simpler to understand “off, low, medium, high” because of Arisa’s obsession with a particular battle manga when she was young.

Unleashing a small amount of their full power, Tama and Pochi ran toward the monsters.



“Goodness...”

Tama sped past the soldier mantis, and its leg sliced apart at the joint.

“Oh my goodness...”

Pochi flashed into action, and the mantis’s long neck that none of the students had been able to put a dent in was suddenly split in two.

“Oh my goodness gracious, you two!”

Cyna clapped her hands with delight.

The students who’d been fighting for their lives just moments ago now watched the unstoppable pair with their jaws practically hitting the ground.

“She cut through that tough soldier mantis leg with just an ordinary iron sword.”

“That’s because she aimed for the joints. What’s really crazy is the dog-eared one, who cut off its head!”

“Dumbass! Do you realize how hard it would be to aim for that scythe-leg joint when it’s swinging around like crazy?!”

Pochi and Tama smiled bashfully at the students’ praise.

“Crap! The other ones are coming this way!”

Everyone turned pale at the vice leader’s cry.

Well, not quite *everyone*.

“Don’t worry, be happyyy...?”

“Bugs are just bugs no matter how many, sir.”

Tama and Pochi shot toward the approaching soldier mantises.

“Swiftly death to evil, sir!”

“Monsters die if they are kiilled...?”

Not a soul in sight made any comment on Tama’s and Pochi’s oddly off-kilter phrases.

The two darted around the soldier mantises, felling one after another.

“Dooone?”

“Too easy, sir.”

Once they’d defeated all the soldier mantises, the pair automatically started collecting the cores out of habit from their labyrinth lifestyle.

“Soldier mantis cores are worth twenty meat skewers, sir.”

“Strip the shells, toooo?”

“Of course, sir! If you get them off in one piece, they’re worth fifteen skewers, sir!”

Evidently, they assessed the value of things in meat skewers.

“There’s something on its head, sir.”

“A screeew?”

Tama and Pochi retrieved metallic parts that had been driven into the monsters’ heads.

Though they didn’t realize it, these were monster-controlling magic items that had been smuggled in from the Weaselman Empire.

“So we’re saved...?”

“Yeah, those two defeated all the monsters.”

“Oh, thank goodness!”

Once they learned that the threat had been eliminated, the students slumped to the ground, while the children started crying out of relief.

“Uh-oooh?”

“That’s no good, sir.”

Tama and Pochi panicked at the chorus of crying.

They couldn’t decide whether to offer the children candy or break out their precious reserves of jerky.

“Not to worry. Just let them cry themselves out.”

Cyna came over to the pair, along with Sherin.

“Thank you, Tama and Pochi. I am ever so proud to call you my dear friends.”

“Nye-he-he—?”

“That makes Pochi proud, too, sir.”

Tama and Pochi wriggled with delight at the open praise from their friend.

“Thanks so much, you two. You saved us all.”

Sherin bowed her head to both of them.

“Don’t worry, be happyyy?”

“We only did what was natural, sir. We should worry more about treating the injured, sir.”

At that, Sherin stood up to go to the aid of her teacher and upperclassmen.

“Once they’ve been treated, perhaps we should move along as soon as possible,” Cyna suggested.

“Yes, I’ll have the other cadets help, too.”

Sherin broke into a run.

But a moment later, that optimistic atmosphere was shattered.

“AIEEEEEEE!”

Someone let out a scream.

It came from the direction in which Barry and the others had fled.

“Are there monsters over there, too?”

Cyna looked anxious.

There was a series of small explosions, and several shadows flew through the air.

Their outlines clearly belonged to black-cloaked men, not young boys.

“What was that? Barry and the others can’t use Fire Magic.”

The vice leader’s observation was correct: The Fire Magic user and the men in black cloaks were the guards who’d been assigned to watch Sherin.

“Look! It’s Barry and the others! They’re all there!”

Barry and his hangers-on came half running, half tumbling out of the forest.

Behind them was a giant tiger with red and black stripes. If anyone with the “Analyze” skill were present, they would see that it was a level-48 airwalk tiger.

“Meeeat?”

“Looks tasty, sir.”

Tama and Pochi licked their lips when they saw the airwalk tiger.

“That monster is toying with my upperclassmen...,” Sherin murmured.

The airwalk tiger, with the same nature of any catlike creature, was playing with its fleeing prey.

Perhaps this was fortunate, though. That was probably the only reason Barry and his friends were still alive, despite being pursued by a monster far more powerful than they were.

“Tama, Pochi...please save them.”

Sherin asked the pair to rescue the very boys who had constantly teased her.

Of course, it was only because she had no idea how powerful the airwalk tiger was that she could make such a reckless request.

“Aye-aye, siiir?”

“Leave it to us, sir.”

Tama and Pochi readily agreed.

“C-can you really fight that beast?!” Cyna cried in alarm.

“But of cooourse...?”

“It does look a little strong, though, sir.”

“Hundred perceeent?”

“Yes, sir. Full power, sir.”

“Aye-aaaye...”

The pair turned off their power-limiter bracelets and dashed toward the monster, kicking up dust in their wake.

“H-heeeeeelp!”

Barry and his buddies came running with tears and snot streaming down their faces.

The airwalk tiger caught up to one of the boys and batted him with a huge front paw, sending him tumbling to the ground next to Barry.

Distracted, Barry tripped and fell.

“Tama, take care of that one, sir.”

“Aye-aaaye...”

Tama caught the boy who’d been sent flying and splashed him with a magic potion.

“N-no... NOOOOO!”

The airwalk tiger’s front paw swung down toward Barry’s face.

Unable to crawl or run away, Barry instinctively shut his eyes, freezing in place and preparing for the worst.

But the final blow never came.

“Wha...?”

Barry opened his eyes and gaped in disbelief.

“No way...”

The boy couldn't believe what he was seeing.

Standing above him, stopping the fortress-crushing claws of the airwalk tiger, was a dog-eared girl even smaller than he was.

"To the rescue...?"

A force grabbed him from behind and tossed him to safety.

Barry looked up to complain about the rough treatment, only to find that he'd been saved by a cat-eared girl.

"Y-you two..."

"It's Pochi and Tama's turn now, sir."

"Oui oooui!"

Pochi and Tama spoke without even looking over their shoulders.

To Barry and the other boys, their tiny backs loomed larger than life.

TYIGGGGGEZR.

With a roar, the airwalk tiger unleashed a turbulent storm of attacks.

"Hiya! Hah! Yaaah! Sir!"

"Mew! Mya! Nyooo?"

The pair parried the attacks even faster than the tiger could move, but the brittle iron swords and their short statures could only stand up to so much.

Tama and Pochi were knocked back, landing on their feet near Barry and the others.

"Run awaaay?"

"She's right, sir. Leave this to us and escape, sir."

Without their usual equipment, it would be difficult even for these mithril explorers to fight a nearly equal opponent while also protecting people behind them.

"B-but!"

"We gotta..."

The boys' hesitant stammers were drowned out by the clash of metal on metal.

Pochi's iron sword snapped, one of the shards leaving a small scratch on her forehead.

"Hurry up and run, sir. Quick, while we hold it here!"

"Dammit, fine, let's get outta here! ...Use this!"

Seeing the dark look on Pochi's face, Barry shouted at his companions. Then he tossed his short sword to Pochi before leading them to run away at top speed.

"Whoopsie, sir."

Pochi caught the short sword and drew it from its scabbard.

It was made out of a mithril alloy.

TYIGGGGGEZR.

Tama, who'd been keeping the airwalk tiger occupied, landed in front of Pochi.

"Snip-snaaap?"

The tiger had broken Tama's iron sword, too.

"Leave this to Pochi, sir."

Pochi's short sword glowed with red light.

"N-no way!"

"A little kid like that?"

"Is this for real?!"

The knights' school students who were watching the fight all clamored in shock.

"It's 'Spellblade,' sir."

Pochi's short sword was surrounded with red magic power.

It was a secret technique known to precious few, said to be usable by only the

finest warriors in all the Shiga Kingdom.

“Tama toooo?”

A red blade of magic burst out of the broken stub of her iron sword.

She took advantage of iron’s tendency to repel magic power and created “Spellblade” where there was no metal.

“Tama’s so skilled, sir.”

“Nye-he-he? One mooore...?”

Picking up the broken sword Tama had tossed aside, Pochi created a second “Spellblade” sword.

TYIGGGGEZR.

Wary of the pair’s swords, the airwalk tiger howled and ran up into the sky.

“Get back heeere...?”

“‘Spellblade,’ GO, sir!”

Red beams zapped toward the tiger from their blades: Spellblade Shots.

“...Huh? What the—?!”

“The ‘Spellblade’ flew?”

“Is that a spell?”

The knights’ school students didn’t appear to be familiar with Spellblade Shot.

“It blocked them, sir.”

“Wind barrierrr?”

The airwalk tiger went higher, alarmed that its wind barrier had broken.

TYIGGGGEZR.

Wind blades flew from the airwalk tiger.

“Swoosh-swash-swiiish...”

“Uh-oh, sir!”

Tama dodged the wind blades by a hair with acrobatic elegance, while Pochi

jumped out of the way with comically exaggerated movements.

Frustrated as its attacks were all dodged, the airwalk tiger cloaked itself in purple lightning.

“Tama, it’s all crackly, sir!”

“Aye...”

TIGGGGEZR.

“Table fliiip?”

Pochi used one of the Earth Magic walls that lay scattered on the ground to block the lightning attack.

“Yeeeeek, sir.”

“Cracklyyy?”

The aftershocks of the attack reached the pair in a form not unlike static electricity, making them both squirm ticklishly.

“Counterattack, sir!”

“Aye-aye, siiir?”

Leaping out from behind their cover, the pair ran along the ground, firing Spellblade Shots.

The airwalk tiger kicked through the air to dodge the red orbs.

“Hiyaaa, sir!”

With Pochi’s shout, the red shot changed directions and hit the airwalk tiger in the side.

“Fusion attack, sir!”

“Okey-dokeeey?”

Pochi and Tama did a double jump into the air, where Pochi used Tama as a launching pad to shoot straight toward the airwalk tiger.

TYIGGGGEZR.

The monster fled even higher into the sky.

“Not so fast, sir!”

With the help of her “Skywalking” skill, Pochi ran through the air.

Unlike “Skylaunching,” which allowed free movement through the air, Pochi’s “Skywalking” could only make enough platforms for five or six steps.

But luckily...

“Gotcha, sir!”

Pochi managed to catch the airwalk tiger by the tail.

TIGGGGEZR.

The monster thrashed around, but Pochi kept a tenacious grip on its tail, dragging herself up onto its back.

“You’re not getting away, sir!”

Pochi’s short sword gleamed with dazzling red light.

TYIGGGG-GWGYA.

Sensing danger, the airwalk tiger tried to cover itself with lightning, but it was stopped short by a red blast of magic from the ground that hit it squarely in the forehead.

“Nice assist, sir.”

Pochi peeked down at the ground, where Tama gave a thumbs-up.

“Time for my special attack—Vanquish Strike!”

Pochi’s special move struck the base of the tiger’s neck at point-blank distance.

It easily cut through the airwalk tiger’s defense barrier, tearing into its metallic fur and steely sinews, and finally piercing through the thick bone that protected the brain stem.

“...Too shallow, sir.”

Pochi could tell from the feeling in her hilt that it wasn’t enough.

Unlike her usual Magic Sword, this mithril-alloy short sword didn’t have a high enough degree of magic power permeation.

GWGYAAAAA.

The airwalk tiger's body twisted around in the air in reaction to the unexpected damage. Still in a precarious position from using her special attack, Pochi lost her balance and went flying.

"Aaaaaah, sir!"

With a nonplussed scream, Pochi dropped toward the ground, slowing her impact with "Skywalking."

But because the airwalk tiger had been so high in the sky, she ran out of "Skywalking" uses while she was still only partway down.

"Uh-oh, sir..."

Pochi flailed around in midair until Tama swooped up to retrieve her, looking like a flying squirrel in her pink cloak.

"Gotchaaa—?"

"Thank you, Tama, sir."

"No worriiies—?"

The pair beamed at each other.

GWGYAAAAA.

Her ears pricking up at the howl behind them, Tama tossed Pochi toward the ground.

Several wind blades slashed the air between them—attacks from the airwalk tiger.

It was high-level enough that even a special attack to a vital point wasn't enough to kill it.

"That was close, sir."

Pochi landed on the ground, and a bag dropped down next to her.

"It's Pochi's Fairy Pack, sir."

Tama must have retrieved the Fairy Packs from the top of the boulder while Pochi was climbing up the airwalk tiger's back in midair.

“Falling-leaf jutsuuu...?”

Still gliding through the air, Tama mimicked an air-battle technique to zigzag onto the airwalk tiger’s back.

Even as the airwalk tiger struggled, Tama used her ninja moves to stick tight to its fur.

Then the tiger suddenly changed directions and crashed into the ground headfirst.

“Tiger-drop jutsuuu...?”

Standing atop the monster as it twitched in a crater of its own making, Tama put her hands together in a ninja pose.

This was a similar move to the “naga drop” she had used to take down a flying Elder Naga in what was now Muno County.

“We’ve got you now that you’re grounded, sir!”

Pochi pulled out her precious sword from her Fairy Pack.

“‘Blink’—quick draw, Vanquish Strike!”

Accelerating toward the tiger monster, Pochi drew her sword as she used a second special attack.

A red line carved itself deep into the airwalk tiger’s neck.

“‘Blink’—Vorpall Fang!”

From the other side, Tama used her twin Magic Swords to slice the monster’s neck as well.

GWGYAAAAA.

The airwalk tiger leaped back into the sky, despite its head lolling on its damaged neck.

Its eyes were fixed not on its attackers, Tama and Pochi, but on the children watching the battle from atop the bolder.

“Oh nooo...?”

“Intercept, sir!”

Tama and Pochi fired Spellblade Shots, but the airwalk tiger ignored them and charged toward the boulder.

They hurried to give chase—but they weren't going to make it in time.

“Bliiink’...”

“Dash, sir!”

Speeding up, Tama and Pochi closed in on the tiger little by little.

“Mew!”

“We’re in trouble, sir!”

Several wind blades appeared around the monster as it ran through the air.

If it used those, the children would be hurt or worse.

Though Tama and Pochi fired Spellblade Shots to intercept the wind blades, they couldn't aim properly while running at full speed.

They had taken out only half the wind blades before the airwalk tiger reared back to fire.

Tama and Pochi looked on in despair.

“...Divine Lance!”



*

A cool voice echoed through the air, accompanied by a blazing ray of light that set off sparks as it sped across the sky.

A second ray joined it in scattering the wind blades; then both pierced the airwalk tiger. It was only when they stopped moving that the rays of light resolved into telephone pole-size transparent spears.

The light drained from the airwalk tiger's eyes, and its corpse crashed to the ground.

"We're saaaved?"

Someone approached, hopping from treetop to treetop.

"Sorry I'm late."

"Hikaruuu?"

It was Hikaru, who'd seen the signal flare from the ruins and come to help.

"Nice saaave?"

"I was afraid we wouldn't make it in time, sir."

"Are either of you hurt?"

Hikaru peered at the young pair.

"We're fiiine?"

"It was no biggie, sir."

Tama and Pochi each chugged a small magic potion and struck a triumphant pose.

"The two of you took on an airwalk tiger this size...? You're pretty impressive for being so small."

The pair giggled shyly at Hikaru's praise.

"Break it dooown?"

"You're right, sir. We have to drain the blood quick or it won't taste as good, sir."

“If you’re taking that home, want me to carry it in my ‘Inventory’ for you?”

“Yaaay!”

“Yes please, sir!”

“Normally it wouldn’t fit in the opening, but with a little imagination... Ta-da!”

Hikaru pushed the airwalk tiger into the black rectangle of her “Inventory,” then fiddled with something until the rectangle expanded to fit the tiger’s enormous frame, shoving it inside.

“Pochi! Tama!”

As they went back with Hikaru, Cyna was the first to run over to them.

“Are you quite all right?”

She patted down Tama’s and Pochi’s bodies frantically.

“Fwah-ha-haaa—!”

“That tickles, sir. Tama and Pochi are fine, sir.”

Rather than worry their dear friend by telling her they’d healed with magic potions, the pair simply smiled and said they were fine.

Before long, Sherin, Barry, and some of the others came over, too.

“Thank you, Pochi and Tama.” There were tears in Sherin’s eyes. “Someday, I’ll get just as strong as you two and protect everyone.”

“You go, giiirl?”

“I’m sure a hard worker like you can do it, Sherin, sir!”

Tama and Pochi cheered on Sherin’s determination.

“E-erm...”

“We, uh...”

Barry and his friends shuffled over hesitantly.

“We’re sorry.”

“Please forgive us.”

The three of them got on their hands and knees, apologizing with their heads

to the ground.

“Nyuuu!”

“Ummm...sir...”

Unaccustomed to such treatment, the duo didn't know how to react.

They looked pleadingly toward their friend Cyna, as if surely she would come up with a clever solution.

Cyna grinned, then put on a solemn expression and nodded like a true noble.

“Come to think of it, you did say that if these two ever had to help you, you'd become their 'servants or henchmen or whatever you want,' did you not?”

“W-well, uh...”

“We did say that, but—”

“Well, they did save your lives. What do you think you ought to do now, hmm?”

As Barry and his buddies scrambled for excuses, Cyna gave them an ultimatum with a sunny smile.

“Kn-knights don't go back on their word...”

“Fine, we'll be your stupid henchmen.”

“‘Fine’? ‘Stupid’?” Cyna repeated pointedly, prompting them to correct themselves.

“Please let us be your henchmen, Miss Pochi, Miss Tama.”

With the last of their pride stripped away by Cyna, Barry and the others bowed their heads.

“Henchmeee...?”

Tama and Pochi gave Cyna a bewildered look.

“It's like a cross between an apprentice and a friend,” she explained.

“First we made a bestie, and now we even have henchmen, sir!”

Pochi jumped up and down for joy.

“Lots of friiends—?”

“Let’s keep it up until we have a hundred, sir.”

“Aye-aye, siiir?”

Tama and Pochi grasped each other’s hands tightly, and Cyna added hers on top.

“There’s not much time left in the spring semester, but let’s make the most of it, shall we?”

“But of cooourse?”

“You said it, sir!”

The three besties grinned at one another, reaffirming their friendship.

Standing nearby, Barry and his friends—no, the henchmen—looked on with expressions that were difficult to describe.

Interlude: After the Trip

“Did you have fun on the field trip?”

“Aye!”

“It was very, very exciting, sir!”

When they got back to the royal capital manor, Tama and Pochi eagerly conveyed the fun of the field trip to the rest of the group with the help of a great deal of gesturing.

On top of their “bestie,” it seemed they now had “henchmen.”

From the sound of it, the nuance was more of an apprentice than a manservant.

“When I saw the signal flare go up, I never would’ve guessed that they were fighting an airwalk tiger. Boy, was I surprised.”

“Ni-he-he?”

“It was a fun challenge, sir.”

Mistaking Hikaru’s comment for a compliment, Tama and Pochi beamed.

Until Liza bopped them both on the head anyway.

“How many times have we told you to press the emergency alert button if a powerful enemy shows up?”

From their expressions, they’d clearly forgotten.

“Sorryyy...”

“We’re sorry, sir.”

Since it had appeared right after a series of weak monsters, evidently it hadn’t occurred to them to press the button in time.

“It’s a good thing you showed up when you did, Hikaru.”

“Ah-ha-ha, I just finished off what was already just about done. They could’ve easily won without me, I’m sure.”

I thanked Hikaru despite her modesty.

“By the way, I found this...”

Hikaru pulled out a crushed metal part from her Item Box.

“A Screw, huh?”

It was a tool for controlling monsters that came from the Weaselman Empire.

My guess was that the people who had attempted to assassinate Duke Vistall were using it to try to take Sherin hostage.

“Did they catch the culprits who were controlling the monsters?”

“I don’t know if it was all of them, but they did find a bunch of massacred corpses.”

They’d been torn apart by giant claws, likely killed by the airwalk tiger.

“Was the airwalk tiger being controlled, too?”

“Uh-uh. There was no Screw in its head. That type of monster tends to be motivated by curiosity, so it probably got drawn to the movement of all those monsters.”

Ah, so the people who were up to no good basically got killed by karma.

“What were you doing out there anyway?” I asked Hikaru.

“Some of my friends are buried in the area. I just happened to be visiting their graves when everything went down.”

Hikaru looked a little somber.

“More importantly, the auction starts tomorrow, right? Are you all ready?”

“Yep, locked and loaded.”

She had obviously changed the subject to clear up the slight sadness in the air. I went along with the flow.

My biggest objective in the auction was the Prayer Ring.

I wanted to win it no matter what, since it might be able to free Arisa and Lulu from their Geist.

I'd made all kinds of preparations, although maybe I should come up with a few last-ditch measures in case of emergency.

"Oh, I know! Sete gave me a bunch of gold to help me make arrangements or some such thing. Why don't you use it to help with a winning bid?"

With that, Hikaru reached into her Item Box and handed me a pouch of around a thousand gold coins she'd gotten from the king.

"In that case, you can use what I've earned from helping Miss Nina and the Echigoya Company, too."

Arisa brought out a pouch as well, prompting the rest of the group to start piling their pocket money on the table from their Fairy Packs.

"I-it's not much, but..."

"Master, I will provide my stocks, I declare."

"Here."

"This is the prize money I earned from my battles in Labyrinth City."

Liza had a pretty significant stash.

"Pochi will give up her pocket money, too, sir!"

"Tama toooo?"

Tama and Pochi enthusiastically fished through their Fairy Packs, though not to much avail.

"Found it, sir!"

Pochi found a single copper coin and added it to the table with a big smile.

Tama's shoulders slouched; she must not have found any.

"Sorryyy...", she said despondently.

I patted her head. "No need to apologize."

It was no surprise that she didn't have any left, since I only ever gave Tama and Pochi enough money to buy snacks anyway. No doubt the money I gave

them for the New Year had already been turned into meat skewers, too.

“Hikaru, everyone, thank you.”

I bowed my head in gratitude to the group for the 1,300 or so gold coins on the table.

I already had some 300,000 gold coins prepared for the auction, but the gesture was so sweet that I couldn't turn them down.

Once the auction was over, I'd return their money with my heartfelt thanks.

“Hey, Satou. What's the auction hall like?”

“The main hall is about as big as a sports arena. I'm told that there will be lots of shopping stalls and food carts set up at the venue on the big day, sort of like a festival.”

The rest of the girls looked fascinated by my response to Hikaru's question.

“I'll probably be stuck in the auction hall all day, but I'll give you each some spending money to enjoy it to the fullest.”

“Exciting.”

“Yaaay?”

“Sir!”

Mia and the others all expressed their excitement.

“Sounds like the kind of place where there might be a lot of pickpockets and purse snatchers.”

“Yeah, there are already some out and about.”

I'd spotted a few thefts when I went with some of the Echigoya Company to hand over goods for sale.

There were also con men near the auction hall selling fakes and criminal guild members milling about, all of whom I'd captured and turned in to the guards' station.

“Who are you going as on the day of?”

“Kuro, I think.”

I was going as a member of the Echigoya Company.

I'd heard at a tea party that there was a system of using a proxy to bid at the auction, which many nobles used to participate indirectly. Thus, I had set up that system for Satou to use a hired proxy to bid on scrolls, Gift Orbs, and so on.

"Well, no cheating."

"I would never lay a hand on my employees."

My heart belongs only to my beloved Miss Aaze, the high elf of Bolenan Forest.

Now, all that was left to do was to win the Prayer Ring in the auction and free Arisa and Lulu from their Geist, and my mission in the royal capital would be complete.

I was a little curious about the Ichirou Suzuki from Hikaru's world, but if the deity said he wouldn't show up, it would probably be fine.

If only there were two Prayer Rings, I would use the other one to wish that Hikaru could be reunited with her Ichirou...

Oh, right, I almost forgot.

"Hikaru, I wanted to ask you a favor..."

Might as well throw in one last strategic move.

Interlude: The Day Before the Auction

“A Magic Sword stronger than the Champion’s Sword?!”

“Yes, to be sold at the auction. And what’s more, it’s said to dance through the air like the legendary Holy Sword Claidheamh Soluis.”

“Grrr, damn that Echigoya Company... They would go that far?!”

In the royal castle salon, a lord groaned aloud at the report from his subordinate, information directly from an Echigoya Company manager.

“I cannot believe they would offer up a Magic Sword on par with the national treasure, even if it is to reduce the number of people bidding on the Prayer Ring...”

“I imagine it only has limited usefulness as a Magic Sword, though.”

“Even so...”

“Yes, the nobles will still clamor to buy it. It’s a rare shot at an item they can brag about to others.”

This was a prototype Satou had made in an attempt to re-create the abilities of the Holy Sword Claidheamh Soluis.

As the lord predicted, its practical usefulness as a weapon was limited, which was likely why Satou decided to provide it for sale.

“But if that is all he has to offer, then he will only eliminate one competitor...”

The lord looked doubtful.

All the people who didn’t win the bid on the sword wouldn’t lose any money, after all.

“W-well...”

“Is there something else?”

“Yes, I’m afraid it’s not just the flying sword.”

“What?!”

The subordinate explained that other equally priceless items were being put up for sale: a spear that returned to its holder after being thrown, a Magic Sword that produced its own “Spellblade,” a buckler that could instantaneously produce an intermediate magic shield, and so on.

“It seems many people are hoping to win at least one. That will reduce the number of the masses and merchants significantly.”

“Perhaps even Marquis Kelten and the other military nobles?”

“Indeed... Ah, I see now!” The lord jumped up from his seat. “So that’s your game, Echigoya Company!”

Careful not to upset the lord, his subordinate waited for him to continue.

“They’re plotting to reduce the power of the group as a whole by driving wedges among the major factions!”

Some of the dukes and pedigreed noble families were attempting to collect money from their dependents and allies in order to acquire the Prayer Ring.

But nobles of the same faction were not a monolith. With rumors like these about, there were sure to be some who would try to get out of providing funds in order to secretly act on their own.

“They really want the Prayer Ring that badly, eh...”

Disturbed anew by the power of the Echigoya Company, the lord could not decide whether to pursue the Prayer Ring to the last or give up and go after a national treasure—like prize.

And indeed, similar conversations were taking place throughout the royal capital, producing many minds who could not sleep for indecision.

Even at the Echigoya Company, the cause of all these worries, Manager Eluterina and Tifaleeza were spending a sleepless night.

But in their case...

“Would a flashy ruby necklace look best with this new dress? Or perhaps a

more understated sapphire necklace? ...Ahhh, I simply cannot make up my mind!”

“El, is it really all right for me to borrow such a fancy dress?”

Normally, Tifaleeza addressed her as “Manager” or “Miss Eluterina,” but outside of business hours, she had permission to call her by the nickname “El.”

“Why, of course! We’ll be by Lord Kuro’s side all day tomorrow, after all! It would be an insult to him to not look our finest. I’ll lend you accessories as well—choose whatever you’d like from the jewelry box.”

“A-all right. Thank you.”

The pair stayed up late into the night, choosing their outfits for the next day.



“Well, aren’t you a sight.”

“Ugh, Pippin...”

Gazing at the shadows from the window of her high-up jail cell, Shadow Thief Sharururuun grunted without turning.

Apparently, even a prison tower on the grounds of the town guards’ headquarters was an easy task for Pippin to enter.

“You seem awfully down for someone who made one little mistake, no?” Pippin teased.

She didn’t even raise her head.

“It was a total defeat. I didn’t give myself away. My disguise was perfect, and I didn’t do anything suspicious that would make someone analyze me. I watched the person I was disguising myself as for days on end beforehand, memorizing her habits down to the tiniest detail.”

Pippin listened in silence as Sharururuun spoke faster than usual.

“But he saw right through me. He came after me as sure as if he’d known I was Shadow Thief Sharururuun all along.”

She rubbed the bruise from when she’d been pinned to the ground.

“You’d better get your revenge, then.”

“Revenge?”

Sharururuun raised her head for the first time.

“Sure. It might’ve just been a coincidence, yeah? Usually your disguises would fool even a guard with the ‘Analyze’ skill.”

Rather than fooling the “Analyze” skill, Sharururuun specialized in acting so naturally that no one would bother analyzing her.

“Or is the one person I saw as my rival so small-time that she’d let one little coincidence bring her down for good?”

“Hmph, that’s a cheap shot.”

Despite herself, the smile was returning to Sharururuun’s lips.

“Worked, though, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, as much as I hate to admit it.”

Sharururuun stood up, her chains rattling.

“Hate to do this after getting you all worked up, but I’m gonna have to wait to break you out till the last minute. You get it, right?”

“Yeah, of course.”

If she escaped tonight, they would figure out what she was really after based on what she’d tried to steal and tighten up security at the auction hall.

“I’ll come get you out tomorrow afternoon. Will that be enough time?”

“Course it will. I’ll pull it off for sure this time—just you watch.”

“Now, that’s what I like to hear from my rival.”

With a roguish grin, Phantom Thief Pippin’s shadow and sound alike were gone.

“I swear I won’t fail this time. Even if you’re there again...Pendragon.”

Gazing at the moon through the barred window, Sharururuun swore quietly to herself.

But she had no idea how difficult that vow would be to keep...

Auction

Satou here. The word auction makes me think of a place where artwork and jewelry are sold to the elite at unbelievably high prices. It's hard to fathom how someone can pay twice or even ten times as much as an average company man might make in a lifetime, all for a single item.

"We've been waiting for you, Lord Kuro!"

When I used my Space Magic spell Return to teleport to the Echigoya Company, the manager greeted me in a high, taut voice.

Instead of her usual sharp businesswoman look, she wore the stylish dress of a typical noblewoman.

It looked similar to the dress that a count's daughter had been boasting about at the tea party the day before.

Checking in my AR, I saw that it was from the same workshop. A single dress cost an outrageous thirty gold coins, but that wasn't too tall an order on the manager's yearly salary.

"Now, let us be on our way!"

"Just a moment, please."

As Eluterina reached out to take my arm with a white-gloved hand, Tifaleeza's sharp voice stopped her. Since she was coming along to the auction, she wore a similar dress to the manager's instead of her Echigoya Company uniform.

When the two of them stood side by side, one beauty with silver hair and one with golden hair, it was like a gorgeous image out of a fairy tale.

"Manager, you've forgotten the matter of His Excellency the prime minister."

"I—I remember."



Miss Manager cleared her throat under Tifaleeza's icy stare.

What about the prime minister?

"I had planned to relay that once we were settled in our VIP seats at the auction."

"Are you sure you didn't just get so excited about going on a date with Lord Kuro that you forgot?"

One of the executive staff poked her head into the room to tease the manager.

This earned her a steely glare, which sent her running into the next room with a joking cry of, "Ooh, scary!"

Manager Eluterina flailed her hands frantically, her face bright red.

...Honestly.

Can't they take this more seriously? We're about to head to the battlefield.

"You can get excited *after* you've fulfilled your duties."

"R-right! I shall serve you with all my heart!"

For some reason, the scolding just made her face turn an even deeper shade of red.

She must have taken the word *duties* in a weirdly perverted way.

"Lord Kuro, by your leave, I will relay the message myself. Last night, we received a verbal note from the prime minister thanking us for 'the expeditious delivery of supplies for rebuilding,' along with a letter."

Without giving the manager a chance to speak up, Tifaleeza smoothly gave me the prime minister's message. The letter was similar in contents to the verbal note but with one major addition.

"It says he'll pay us with a money order that can be converted into cash immediately."

The prime minister must have known we were gathering funds for the auction.

He was a thoughtful guy for such a bigwig.

“Well, we wouldn’t want the prime minister’s kindness to go to waste. Let’s stop by the commerce guild.”

I was sure he’d had the money sent to the commerce guild as a favor to us as well.

I visited the commerce guild before heading to the auction hall with Eluterina and Tifaleeza in tow.



“Cyna, over heeere?”

“Hurry up, henchmen, sir! Pochi will treat you to skewers today, sir!”

I heard familiar voices coming from outside the carriage.

Peering through the window, I saw Tama and Pochi with a small gaggle of children, running around and buying snacks.

A little farther back, Liza and Nana were keeping an eye on the kids.

Mia walked with them alongside a gentleman who must be the musician she was performing with at the music hall.

“Miss Master Lulu, this meat wrap is simply delicious.”

“What’re you sayin’? You gotta start with sweet wheat candy, dude!”

Lulu was sandwiched between a chef from the Echigoya Company and the redheaded Neru, both chattering away.

Arisa seemed to be enjoying herself with them, too.

“Did you see something of interest, Lord Kuro?”

“No, just spotted Advisor Arisa and Neru and the others, that’s all.”

I turned away from the window as I answered the manager’s question.

Before long, the carriage passed the crowded gate and pulled up to the disembarking area.

There were a lot of ladies and gentlemen wearing masks and veils.

“Lord Kuro, over here!”

When we entered the auction hall, we saw one of the Echigoya staff girls hopping up and down, waving at us.

As we walked over, a small-statured girl riding a stone wolf made her way toward us through the crowd.

“Louna, how many times have I told you not to ride the stone wolf indoors?”

“Awww, but I like how everyone stares at me when I ride this.”

The staff girl seemed unconcerned with her manager’s scolding.

“You can discipline her later.”

With that, I let the staff member lead the way.

We went through the carefully guarded gates and followed a cramped, winding hallway.

“Lord Kuro, this is it! The special exhibit counter!”

“I’ve been awaiting your arrival, sir. Miss Louna has explained everything. We will analyze and accept each item in order of the list.”

I’d already handed over most of our items for sale, but there were a few that I was asked to bring on the day of for safety reasons, like some of the Magic Swords.

A silver-haired gentleman concierge and two appraisers were waiting at the counter, as well as several other officials.

The guard behind them was a seasoned level-40 knight.

“Please place the items on this table.”

I took out each item in order of the list and handed them over.

Then he turned to hand them to the “Analyze” skill user next to him...

“Wh-what in the...?”

The gentleman stiffened as he saw the appraiser slumped against the wall.

His guard drew his sword and stepped in front of the concierge.

Okay, I guess I better explain.

“That man is a thief. Take away the disguising magic tool he has hidden in his breast pocket and have the other one analyze him.”

Looking doubtful, the concierge gave the orders to the other appraiser.

“Th-this is a Job Change magic tool. J-just as the gentleman from the Echigoya Company says, this man is a thief...”

“But how?! I was so careful to only hire trustworthy individuals...”

Unlike the stunned official, the concierge quickly clapped his hands to draw everyone’s attention and gave orders, sending for a guard to tie up the thief and drag him out of the room.

It did sort of feel like overkill, but hey, no mercy for thieves.

Actually, there might be others, too.

I did a map search limited to the auction hall.

One, two, three...

Several dots appeared on my map to mark criminals.

I wasn’t about to let some pests try to snatch up the Prayer Ring that was supposed to save Arisa and Lulu from their Geist.

“I’ll get rid of the other pests, too.”

I inspected the best route to my targets.

I should be able to pull it off with magic. Using Clairvoyance and Magic Hand to find and open any closed doors in my path, I muttered a fake chant and fired Remote Stun at the targets I’d locked on to with my map.

I sent them along the ceiling to avoid hitting anyone else.

I could see the guided magic shots hitting one after another on my map.

Two of them dodged the first round—a useless attempt at resisting.

The second round was already on its way, hitting the criminals and knocking them out one after another.

Heh-heh. Evil vanquished.

“L-Lord Kuro?”

Oops, I got a little carried away there.

I smiled at the manager to ease her concerned expression.

“No worries. I was expecting this much.”

“No worries?”

Miss Manager blinked at me in surprise.

Oh, crap. I’d accidentally spoken in my normal tone instead of Kuro’s.

“Forget it. Stay focused.”

“R-right...”

I have to calm down...

I looked around at the shocked group of people.

The officials were gaping uselessly, so I addressed the more levelheaded concierge instead.

“What are you all standing around for? There are two on the second floor, two in the warehouse, and one near the underground vault. Go round them up.”

“R-right!”

The concierge gave orders to his subordinates to send them to apprehend the criminals, then rushed to the vault himself.

Honestly. They could’ve done a better job of cleanup in advance.

Once the concierge came back and confirmed that all the already-submitted goods were still safe, we resumed the submission process.

We parted ways with Louna and her stone wolf in the hallway and followed an usherette to the upper noble participants’ waiting room.

The usherette did warn me in a roundabout way that use of magic inside the auction hall was prohibited, though.



“...And that is the bidding process for the auction.”

While the explanation was long, there wasn't much of note.

The only part that stood out was the fact that you had to report your maximum available bidding number in advance, and you weren't allowed to bid higher than that. I'd already heard about this from the manager and Eluterina, though.

“Are there any questions?”

“Once we win an item, can we pick it up right away?”

I had a few questions, but this was the most important one.

“No, they will be brought to the exchange area on the first floor during the intermissions. Once a successful bidder picks up their item, its security is on them. Please proceed with caution.”

This seemed to be an anti-theft measure.

The auction was broken up into three periods of two-hour bidding and one-hour breaks, for a total of nine hours.

Though the break time sounded long when I first heard this explanation, there turned out to be a good reason.

There was a knock at the door, and a woman walked in accompanied by a guard.

“The official appraiser is here. Now, if you wouldn't mind, please present the money you've brought for bidding.”

The manager had explained to me already why there was a mandatory verification of your cash on hand.

In the old auctions, too many people bid more money than they actually had, leading to borderline civil wars among nobles.

“Is currency besides that of the Shiga Kingdom acceptable?”

“Yes, as long as you've reported it in advance.”

With that confirmation from the usherette, I pulled out pouches full of gold coins from my Item Box, piling them up on the table. Each one contained a

thousand gold coins.

“Wow...”

“Impressive. So this is the power of the rising company that already serves the royal family...”

The staff members on standby in the waiting room whispered among themselves, picked up by my “Keen Hearing” skill.

Ignoring them, I kept stacking bags of money on the table.

“Wha...?”

“E-erm...”

The usherette and the official appraisers began staring in surprise, too.

That’s weird—they must see this amount of money every day.

I ran out of room for money bags on the table and turned to them.

“It won’t all fit on the table. Can I put the rest on the floor?”

Neither the usherette, the appraisers, nor even the clerks and guards responded, all gaping at me in silence.

All I needed was a yes or a no. Taking their silence as a yes, I dropped more bags of money onto the floor until the usherette finally started reacting again.

“W-wait a minute, please!”

“What? The floor’s no good?”

“No, that’s not the issue here!”

The previously refined young lady started waving her arms around with a more appropriately youthful expression.

It was cute and all, but was that really acceptable on a professional level?

“Just how many gold coins did you bring exactly?!”

“About 310,000, why?”

From what the Echigoya Company’s research had gathered, even the most generous estimates put the upper-class nobles at 100,000 gold coins at the

most. Based on that, the managers and I decided on 300,000 for our bidding budget. The last 10,000 was from the payment for providing reconstruction materials and the money my friends had offered.

For most nobles, while they had a lot of assets, they only had around a thousand gold coins in actual cash.

“A-are you planning on buying out an entire city?!” the usherette shrieked.

“Please calm yourself. I’m afraid you’ve lost your manners.”

“I-I’m terribly sorry...”

The manager’s scolding quieted the usherette.

“At any rate, I cannot possibly analyze this many coins. I’ll sample a few to inspect. For now, we’ll give you banknotes for the number you submitted.”

With that, the official appraiser took three of the 310 bags to begin analyzing.

“Finally, please swear on the name of the great ancestral king Yamato that there are no counterfeits in your coins.”

It felt weird to swear on Hikaru’s name, but I did as I was told.

I guess this was the most effective way to deter liars in this ancestral king-loving kingdom.

“Here are your banknotes for bidding.”

I accepted the banknotes, which each represented 10,000 gold coins, as I listened to the usherette’s explanation.

Each note was marked with a large number 29, indicating the bidder. Since many bidders at the auction were anonymous, it was standard practice to call bidders by their number.

“When you raise this, a Wind Magic user will amplify your voice throughout the hall. Please make sure it’s clearly visible.”

The official appraiser gave me six 10,000-coin banknotes. The remaining twenty-five would be brought to my room later.



“Now what?”

The people walking in the halls suddenly moved to the side and knelt.

“Lord Kuro, it’s His Highness the prince. We should do the same.”

Miss Manager joined Tifaleeza, the usherette, and the others in stationing themselves reverently against the wall.

I was still trying to decide whether to prioritize Kuro’s arrogant characterization or my position as the owner of the Echigoya Company when my eyes met with the eldest prince of the Shiga Kingdom: Crown Prince Sortorik.

He was a handsome man with an intellectual face, looking to be about in his thirties.

“That mask and appearance... You must be the so-called Kuro, servant of Sir Nanashi the Hero.”

“Indeed I am.”

I couldn’t tell from the prince’s tone what he was thinking.

Kuro’s rude response seemed to set off the prince’s entourage, who clamored about my insolence. The prince himself seemed unbothered, however, and raised a hand to silence them.

“Are you saying you bow to no man but your master, Sir Nanashi?”

I looked back at the prince silently.

“Hmph. I’ll let your rudeness slide in acknowledgment of your work defeating demons in Labyrinth City. Keep helping the Hero to work hard for our kingdom.”

In spite of the prince’s willingness to overlook Kuro’s rudeness, there was one discrepancy I had to point out.

“Let me make one thing clear.”

I coolly addressed the prince as he started to walk past me.

“We work to protect the world from danger. Not for the sake of any kingdom.”

“Hmph. As long as it still benefits our kingdom, it matters not.”

The prince laughed scornfully and walked away.

His entourage glared at me, which I ignored, since it was an understandable reaction in their position.

“...I thought my heart was going to stop.”

“Mine too.”

Miss Manager and Tifaleeza put their hands on the floor, letting out deep sighs of relief.

I guess I must have worried them.

“Sorry. I’ll handle it better next time.”

Given the king’s age and all, it would be a bad move to sour my relationship with his heir.

Once the two girls recovered their ability to stand, the usherette led us to nobles’ seat twenty-nine, which had been allotted to the Echigoya Company.

From the height of the nobles’ seats, one could look out over the entire auction hall.

It was arranged in a downward-sloping fan shape, like a university lecture hall. There were seats for around three hundred people, with the noble seats where we stood sticking out halfway up the wall like a balcony. There were about thirty seats in total.

It was difficult to see the adjacent nobles’ seats unless one leaned over the balcony, but the ones across and farther away were clearly visible. There were thin lace veils around each seating area to protect the bidder’s privacy.

“It looks like we still have some time before the bidding starts.”

“Shall I call for a drink or something?”

As Miss Manager checked the time on her magic watch, Tifaleeza glanced toward the handbell that was placed inside each noble seating area, presumably to call for one of the maids waiting just outside.

“No need.”

While privately appreciating Tifaleeza's thoughtfulness, I killed time by gazing at the other nobles' seats and searching the map.

Aside from the prince, the royal family occupied three more noble seats, including the fifth prince.

The king sure has a lot of kids, I thought as I scanned the list. There were nine princes, four of whom had already passed away. The crown prince, the fifth prince, the eighth prince, and the ninth prince were the healthy ones, while the third prince Sharorik was convalescing in a monastery in the countryside.

There were even more princesses—thirteen of them. All the adult princesses except for Princess Sistina were married to powerful Shiga Kingdom nobles or royal families from other kingdoms. Most of the underage princesses were already engaged, too.

Considering the outdated belief that women should stay at home that still seemed prevalent in the Shiga Kingdom, Princess Sistina was in a difficult position. Even if we weren't close enough to be considered friends, I wanted to help her out if there was ever anything I could do to be of assistance.

"Lord Kuro, it certainly looks as though there are more influential nobles here than usual."

"So it would seem."

I'd gotten distracted thinking about the royal family and forgotten to keep surveying the noble seats.

Giving a vague response to the manager, I resumed my investigation.

The majority of the pedigreed nobles here were powerful ones, like the viceroy and his wife from Labyrinth City Celivera and Count Ritton's wife. A majority of the lords seemed to be participating, too, including Duke Ougoch, Duke Vistall, and Marquis Eluette.

There were considerably fewer merchants, with representatives of a few long-standing shops like the Ghookuts Company taking up only three seats in the nobles' section. The lone weaselfolk merchant—Homimudory from the Sahbe Company—was near the front row of the first floor, not in the nobles' seats.

There were foreign ambassadors from places like the Saga Empire and the western regions, too. I didn't see the leprechaun Prince Smartith of the Blybrogha Kingdom, though. He seemed like the curious type, so I was surprised he wouldn't attend an event like this.

"Lord Kuro, the list of items for sale and the rest of the bills have arrived."

Tifaleeza brought over the papers delivered to the nobles' seats.

"It looks like the Prayer Ring is last, just as we suspected."

Miss Manager peered at the list over my shoulder. I nodded, skimming the rest of it from the top.

The first section consisted of weapons, armor, and magic items, followed by potions and jewelry, and finally scrolls, Gift Orbs, and so on.

"So the Claidheamh knockoff is first up, eh?"

This was one of our submissions from the Echigoya Company, my failed attempt at reproducing the Holy Sword Claidheamh Soluis's flying feature. I'd used a Magic Hand mechanism to make the blades fly, but it was a far cry from independently attacking and defending like the real thing, and even the flight speed was much slower.

Although I tried to improve this with wind stones and wind runes for propulsion, it still went only as fast as an arrow and was easy to dodge before it reached full speed. Quite frankly, it was totally defective.

"They probably put it first to excite the crowd right away, since it got the best response during the presentation in the salon."

It was that popular...?

I guess a lot of people must have been fooled by its elegant appearance and high-on-paper specs.

We ended up waiting about an hour after being brought to the hall.

Finally, an announcement rang out that the auction was going to start.

Let the battle begin!



“The first item is the Flying Crimson Sword Louas!”

At the auctioneer’s shout, a cheer rose from the audience seats.

An epic theme song started playing; I looked around and realized a small orchestra had set up in the wings to provide background music.

“When did we give it such an absurd name?”

“It didn’t have an official name yet. Louna must have taken it upon herself... I’ll give her a talking-to later.”

“It’s fine. Won’t be ours for much longer anyway.”

The stone wolf-loving staff member Louna emerged onto the stage with the Claidheamh knockoff—the “Flying Crimson Sword Louas”—in hand.

They must be doing a demonstration before they started the bidding.

Several rings made with Practical Magic floated in the air, and the Flying Crimson Sword smoothly soared out of Louna’s hand to fly through each of them, speeding up to hit a target at the end.

That was pretty impressive. She must have practiced a lot.

“OOOOOOOOOH!”

As soon as the sword broke the target, cheers shook the auction hall enough to hurt my eardrums.

I could see why that demonstration would make it look a whole lot less like a knockoff.

Louna must have a serious knack for naming and presentation.

And sure enough...

“Six hundred gold coins!”

“Six hundred and ten!”

The bidding started at a hundred gold coins and kept skyrocketing from there.

At first, Duke Ougoch and Duke Vistall were bidding, too, but soon it was down to a one-on-one bidding war between the viceroy of the trade city Tartumina and Count Ritton.

Eventually, the momentum slowed to a halt, and the auctioneer banged the hammer that indicated the end of the bidding.

I guess they use hammers to indicate a winning bid in this world, too.

“Bidder number twelve has won the Flying Crimson Sword Louas for the price of two thousand and thirty gold coins!”

Judging by the number, it must be the viceroy of the trade city who had won out.

“That’s more than I expected.”

“I’d say it’s a fitting number for that sword.”

The manager had appraised it as being on par with any national treasure.

The high price set the tone for the next several items, including Magic Swords and Magic Armor.

Some prototype defense-enhancing shields that were different from the types sold at the Echigoya Company went to some imperial knights and the military minister Marquis Kelten.

“Our items all sold at terrific prices.”

Miss Manager looked exceedingly pleased.

I had to agree. Most of the eccentric prototype weapons and armor sold for an average of five hundred gold coins, and even the five mass-produced mithril-plated Magic Swords known as Champion’s Swords, of which there were already several hundred in circulation, sold for three fifty to four hundred gold coins.

But while the former was one thing, I had no idea why the latter would fetch such a high price. Tifaleeza simply responded, “Because they don’t know when they’ll get another chance to buy one.”

Sounds like the demand is still way higher than the supply, then.

But still...

“That’s some serious inflation.”

“Inflation?” Tifaleeza tilted her head in adorable confusion, so I gave her a

simple explanation.

“Now then, let’s move on to the treasures that Red Dragon’s Roar acquired by defeating a floormaster in the Celivera labyrinth! We’ll begin with weapons and armor.”

The spoils were divided up by category because they were a hodgepodge of so many different kinds of items.

Since these spoils were all considered offerings to the king, the seller was technically a representative of the kingdom.

“First up, the Magic Ice Sword Icebranch Fang!”

The blade scattered ice crystals when swung, creating a pretty effect.

I’d assumed that Jelil would keep it as his new sword, but maybe even the leader of Red Dragon’s Roar didn’t have the freedom to do that.

“You’d be the envy of the mithril explorers.”

“Hmm, did we steal the bidders’ interest?”

The price wasn’t going as high as I would’ve expected.

It was only at less than two hundred gold coins, even though its attack power was higher than the Champion’s Swords.

Mr. Jelil looked grim in Duke Vistall’s section of the nobles’ seats.

“I’ve no choice, then... Two hundred and fifty gold coins!”

I couldn’t help but raise my banknotes and call out a bid.

Since the banknotes were there to prove the upper limit of the bidder’s budget, it was perfectly fine to use a 10,000-gold-coin note to make a lower bid.

My shill bid seemed to work: The subsequent bids went up to 260, then 270.

I made a few more shill bids to bring the price up to around 360 gold coins.

That’s where I stopped the bid, since I got the feeling the other bidder was going to give up if I pushed it much higher. In the end, two others went on bidding even after I stopped, bringing the final price to 372 gold coins.

Yet, despite my best efforts, Mr. Jelil’s face still looked dour.

“Makes no sense.”

“Perhaps he thought a labyrinth-made Magic Sword from a floormaster would go higher, since the Champion’s Sword right before it went for four hundred and two gold coins?”

Okay, that made sense.

I nodded at the manager’s words.

“Or maybe...” Tifaleeza considered. “Could he have hired a proxy in hopes of using it himself?”

...Oops.

I didn’t think of that.

If that was the case, maybe I’d done him a disservice.

With that in mind, I didn’t do any shill bids on the rest of Red Dragon’s Roar items, but the first item selling for a relatively high price meant the rest went for higher than average, too.

I had no need for such reservations on Team Pendragon’s spoils, so when those came up next, I went all out on the shill bids partly just to keep myself entertained.

That seemed to help: The adamantite warhammer and paralyzing spear went for far higher prices than I’d expected.

I did win a bid on one of the Thunder Rods, mostly so I wouldn’t be frowned upon for not actually getting anything.

The lone Thunder Crystal Rod drew a deadly bidding war among three Lightning Magic users from the Shiga Thirty-Three Staves, which I decided to stay out of. I could understand their feelings—the Thunder Pearl that served as the core for the Thunder Crystal Rod was an incredibly rare item.

“Lord Kuro, are you sure it was wise to win a bid?”

“One or two should be fine.”

The rules really just meant that I could bid only up to 310,000 gold on one item—it didn’t matter if my final total was a little higher than that.



“Now then, let’s begin the second section. First, the miraculous medicine that Team Pendragon won from the floormaster! From lost limbs to poison to petrification, from incurable illnesses to a demon lord’s curse, this elixir can cure anything! We’ll begin at fifty gold coins...”

“Two hundred gold coins!”

Before the auctioneer even finished his statement, there was a call from the wife of Marquis Ashinen, the viceroy of Labyrinth City Celivera.

“Three hundred gold coins.”

Duke Ougoch gave a cool counterbid.

“Three hundred and one gold coins!”

The weaselfolk merchant Mr. Homimudory raised the bid by a small amount.

“Three hundred and ten gold coins!”

“Four hundred gold coins!”

A long-standing merchant house threw in another small increase, but the viceroy’s wife’s next bid drowned him out.

The normally mild-mannered marchioness sounded uncharacteristically intense today.

She must be desperate to save her dear friend the former Count Poputema from his deathly state.

I silently prayed for her victory.

“It’s going quite high, isn’t it?”

“That it is...”

The bids slowed down after it broke five hundred coins, leaving only the marchioness and Duke Ougoch in a bidding war.

“I-it’s gone over a thousand.”

Tifaleeza held her breath, transfixed.

After a bit of hesitation, the viceroy’s wife finally drove the price into the

realm of four digits.

All eyes gathered on Duke Ougoch's seat.

Sitting a little ways away, the viceroy's wife glowered in that direction intently.

"A-any more bidders?"

The auctioneer counted down from three, then finally banged the hammer to announce the closing of the bids.

Marchioness Ashinen let out a sigh of relief and slumped deep into her seat.

Nicely done, Mrs. Ashinen.

Although even if she hadn't won the bid, I could've easily made some elixirs for her once I did another round of prep work.

"The marchioness of Labyrinth City is truly impressive."

The manager murmured with awe at the woman who'd won the elixir for a thousand gold coins.

Although technically we presented the elixir to the king, they would take an auction fee and give the rest of the gold to us as a reward, which made me feel like I'd swindled the viceroy's wife out of a bunch of money.

I'll just invest the thousand gold coins in some cause that benefits Labyrinth City.

"S-so you used such an expensive potion on Neru and me..."

I glanced over and saw that Tifaleeza was simultaneously turning pale and blushing pink.

"It's fine. It was only a lesser elixir that I used on your burns, not an elixir."

"R-right, of course."

This time, Tifaleeza looked both relieved and disappointed. I was impressed with her subtle range of expressions.

"They're only worth about a quarter of an elixir. Not a big deal."

"A quarter... B-but that's still two hundred and fifty gold coins!"

It was rare for Tifaleeza to raise her voice like that.

“You’re well worth that much.”

Distracted by the bidding for the next item, I didn’t think it through before I blurted out that response. I had to be more careful; my “Fabrication” skill took over whenever I let my guard down.

“You...think so?”

“...Mrrr.”

Tifaleeza went red up to her ears and turned away, while Miss Manager latched on to my sleeve a little sullenly.

The pair of them were acting kind of emotionally unstable today.

Maybe I’d been giving them a bit too much work.

“The cure-alls and advanced potions are selling high, too.”

They went for around the same prices as the Magic Swords. Even for items out of a labyrinth, this inflation was getting a little scary.

“Yes, such things are hard to come by.”

“But the Echigoya Company’s Antidote: All-Purpose is doing well, too.”

“Mm-hmm.” I nodded along vaguely to Miss Manager and the oddly competitive Tifaleeza.

The latter were selling in the range of twenty to forty gold coins. There were few people who could make them, and these ones were especially high-quality goods that I had produced myself, which was probably why they went for several times the market price.

“Grrr, so the rumors about the Echigoya Company selling hair restorers and exhaustion-recovery potions were false...”

When the potion bidding ended, I heard a few such complaints from the first-floor seats.

“Yes, I’m afraid neither is ready for general sale just yet. The former is too difficult for Anne and the others to produce with consistent quality, and the latter all get bought up by officials from the royal castle.”

“Hmm...”

High-quality hair-restoring potions really were surprisingly hard to produce.

Glancing in the direction of the complaints, I saw a few gentlemen with sparse scalps looking crestfallen.

Okay, I'll increase production on those.

Like Arisa once told me, “Gimme a head with hair.”

Maybe I should do a little power leveling for Anne and the rest of the Echigoya Company's alchemists, too.

“Here it comes.”

“At last.”

While I was lost in thought, Tifaleeza and Manager Eluterina suddenly focused on the stage with strangely serious expressions.

Before I could ask why, the auctioneer announced, “Next up is jewelry and artwork,” which was met with high-pitched shrieks and cheers.

That explained it. Lots of women were interested in this sort of thing, and these two were no exception.

Listening closer with my “Keen Hearing” skill, I caught wind that some “miracle jewels on par with Master Gemma's work” were a popular prize.

“Ah, those gems of ours.”

It must be the gemstones I had produced with the Stone Object spell.

“Exactly! When I showed a sample in the salon, I could scarcely move for all the brokers clamoring for a deal.”

“Yes, I'm very curious to see how high the nobles will drive the price.”

Miss Manager and Tifaleeza confirmed immediately.

“The sapphire ring is first, eh?”

I'd modified a sapphire into the shape of a ring, adding a band of light stone in the middle so that the sapphire would glow with flower-patterned light when charged with magic.

“The bidding has begun.”

Starting at ten gold coins, the bids went up in ten-coin increments. Even then, it reached triple digits in the blink of an eye.

“They’re in a downright frenzy, aren’t they?”

“I can’t say I blame them. If you had a gemstone like that, you’d be the talk of high society, and make all kinds of new connections besides.”

Miss Manager’s words explained the reasoning behind the madness.

No wonder the young noblewomen, who valued social standing and connections above all else, were determined to get their hands on it.

Still, I hadn’t been expecting it to sell at a higher price than the Magic Swords.

“Bidder seventeen has won the ring for five hundred and three gold coins!”

The crash of the hammer echoed, followed by the auctioneer’s announcement.

It appeared that the winner of this first round was Count Ritton’s wife, who held a great deal of influence in the high society of the royal capital.

The next several gemstones all went to pedigreed noble wives at considerably high prices.

Most of them didn’t cost much to produce, except the ones that used light stones and diamonds, but that didn’t seem to matter.

I’d already promised to sell similar items to Mrs. Ritton and several of the others. Since those were made-to-order with the family crest, though, I didn’t see any reason to lower the price.

“Astounding. All this for some social clout?”

“That’s not all there is to it.”

“Yes, anyone would dream of wearing a gemstone like that at least once in their lives.”

Tifaleeza and Miss Manager gave sighs of admiration.

“Really?”

“Oh yes.”

“Tell me later which designs you liked best, then. I’ll make one for each of you.”

“A-are you quite sure?”

“I always am.”

I wanted to reward them for all their hard work and dedication. Besides, it’d be easy enough to whip up gems for these two and the rest of the executive staff with a little magic.

“Hooraaay!”

The normally refined Eluterina and coolheaded Tifaleeza smiled widely and even high-fived each other.

As I stared at them in surprise at this unusual reaction, they both turned red and composed themselves.

I was just happy to have made *them* so happy, though.

While I fondly watched Manager Eluterina grinning openly and Tifaleeza struggling in vain to hide a smile of her own, I kept an ear to the second part of the auction.

Although there were a few sculptures and paintings that probably would have thrilled Tama and Nana, I had to pass them up due to the obscenely high speculative prices.

I’ll pick out some nice gifts for them at an art gallery or a specialty plushie store.



And then, at last, the third section began.

It was finally time for the Prayer Ring to come up.

That would be the very last one, of course, but I was still interested in some of the other offerings, especially the scrolls and Gift Orbs.

“Bidder number 310 has won the Summon Pigeon scroll for twenty gold coins!”

Even at auction, the one-use-only nature of scrolls meant that they were only popular with dilettantes, military men, and people connected to scroll workshops like Viscount Siemmen. As such, their prices didn't go very high.

"Number 310 again..."

"They've won everything but the three Ghost Magic scrolls. Perhaps it's Sir Pendragon's proxy?"

Tifaleeza was sharp, as usual.

Her guess was correct: Bidder 310 was the proxy I'd hired.

I gave a budget of a thousand gold coins to buy up scrolls and Gift Orbs.

The three Ghost Magic scrolls my proxy didn't bid on went to Viscount Siemmen, who ran a scroll workshop in the old capital.

Incidentally, they included the Create Lesser Undead scroll that Jelil's party had gotten from the floormaster and two products from Mr. Homimudory, Summon Lesser Ghost and Summon Lesser Undead.

"The next one ought to be a bit more popular."

"Do you think so? It's the Space Magic spell Material Transfer that's supposed to move small objects around, right? And since it's one-use-only, too, I can't think of a single use for it."

True, it wouldn't be any help with fighting monsters.

"Hmm. You're right; there aren't many bids."

A dilettante went up to fifteen gold coins, after which it was down to bids between my proxy and Mr. Homimudory.

"That weaselfolk man is the head of the Sahbe Company, correct? I've heard that Viscount Pendragon bought scrolls from him before. Perhaps he's hoping to sell them to the viscount again?"

In that case, I would've been better off having my proxy hold off before the price went higher. I couldn't exactly go giving orders to my proxy in this situation, though.

All I could do was look on as the price climbed higher, and eventually my

proxy bought it for forty-five gold coins.

I guess even Mr. Homimudory couldn't be sure that I would buy a scroll from him at this price.

That was the last of the scrolls; next up were the Gift Orbs.

These were special items that came out of treasure chests from defeating floormasters, single-use items that gave the user a new skill.

"Poison Resistance seems quite popular," Tifaleeza observed.

"Nobles do have to worry about being poisoned, especially if they have lots of enemies," Miss Manager explained. "I'm sure that's why they're taking the bidding so seriously."

Several nobles were competing for the top bid, especially Duke Vistall, who'd nearly been assassinated twice just recently.

My proxy won the two orbs that had come up before this one, Paralysis Resistance and Water Magic, for 102 and 162 gold coins respectively.

They were fairly popular, too, but not nearly as much as Poison Resistance.

Before Water Magic was a Light Magic orb, which went for 319 gold coins, since it was a necessary magic skill for a Holy Knight.

"Ah, looks like the bidding's over."

"231 gold coins? Not as high as I thought."

"If it went any higher, it would be more cost-effective to just buy up magic antidote items, especially since then your descendants can also use them."

Still, those antidote items weren't as effective—I imagine anyone whose life was in danger would probably want both.

"This next item is the final Gift Orb! It's a mythical skill that has never once been witnessed in Gift Orb form before!"

Even this far into the day, the auctioneer was still as energetic as ever.

"It's none other thaaan..."

He paused dramatically, waiting for the entire audience's attention before

going on.

“The proof of a master swordsman, the one and only Spellblaaaaade!”

“WOOOOOOOOO!”

There was a chorus of almost bloodcurdling screams from swordsmen and nobles with an interest in such things.

I couldn't blame them.

“Spellblade *is* handy.”

It really reduced the amount of time you had to spend cleaning or oiling your blade.

“No, I don't think that's the reason, exactly...”

Miss Manager looked flummoxed.

“Master, is everything all right?”

Arisa contacted me via the Space Magic spell Telephone.

Actually, since I could hear faint chattering in the background, it must be Tactical Talk.

“I heard some serious screaming from outside. Did they get to the Prayer Ring already?”

“No, that was a Spellblade orb.”

The military minister Marquis Kelten and the vice minister Count Boppan were rapid-fire bidding back and forth.

I guess neither of them had the “Spellblade” skill.

“The Prayer Ring is next.”

“Almost time, then.”

“Yep, almost time.”

Soon, I'd finally be able to free Arisa and Lulu from their Geist.

Technically, I had no real proof that it would work without a doubt, but surely the power of a god could break a curse or two.

“I believe in you, master.”

“Master! I believe in you, too!”

Arisa’s words were followed closely by Lulu; then everyone else all chimed in to root for me.

“Thanks. I promise I won’t fail.”

Vowing my victory, I cut off my connection with Arisa and the others.

Now, I’d better contact Hikaru before things get rolling.



“YEEEEEEES!! Now I can use ‘Spellblade,’ tooooooo!”

Just as I finished my conversation with Hikaru, I heard Marquis Kelten bellow triumphantly.

Tears streamed down his face as he struck a triumphant pose in the nobles’ seats.

He must have really wanted that “Spellblade” skill.

“Based on earlier reports and the totals thus far, I believe we’ve eliminated five or six competitors for the Prayer Ring.”

Tifaleeza showed me the list.

She’d been meticulously taking note of all the winning bids this whole time.

“Good. Just as we hoped.”

After a moment, I realized that wasn’t enough and added, “I appreciate your hard work, Tifaleeza.”

The orchestra’s background melody switched from a lively theme to a more mysterious one.

An elderly head priest and a young priest with the “Item Box” skill emerged onto the stage.

There were five different Parion Temple priests with the “Item Box” skill at the auction hall, probably to confuse potential thieves.

“Lord Kuro.”

“Let’s win this no matter what.”

“Of course.”

I nodded firmly at the pair.

“Now, for today’s final item. A heavenly blessing submitted for sale by Parion Temple, it’s a legendary treasure that defines the word *miraculous*!”

The auctioneer dragged things out with a rapturous expression.

We get it—just start already.

“Full of miracles on par with the likes of Prayer Magic, which is granted only to the loftiest of archbishops and pontiffs...it’s the Prayer Ring!”

Feeling impatient to the point of irritability, I let the auctioneer’s rambling go in one ear and out the other.

“The Prayer Ring is sealed away in the Dragonseal Chest, which can only be opened by the head priest of Parion Temple!”

Miss Manager had told me about the fiendish safe known as the Dragonseal Chest when we were discussing the possibilities of the Prayer Ring being stolen. If you tried to open it without knowing the right sequence, the treasure within would be spirited far away from reach.

“Now then, good priests, if you would be so kind.”

The priest produced a strangely decorated cube-shaped chest from the Item Box and held it up to the elderly head priest, who hid the chest behind the sleeves of his robes while he fiddled around.

“Ooooooh! Would you look at that! It’s so briiiiight!”

The auctioneer exclaimed dramatically.

“What dazzling light from within! Yes, this is the Prayer Ring, in which sleeps heavenly miracles!”

The head priest showed the ring to the crowd.

My AR display confirmed that it was the Prayer Ring. I put a marker on it just to be safe.

Just then, I saw a dark shadow approaching the head priest from the wings, reaching for the ring.

A thief.

“Lord Kuro!”

“On it.”

I used my always-active Magic Hand to drag the thief out of the shadows.

This seemed to knock the figure off balance: It landed nowhere near the old priest, hitting the floor and vanishing.

“Thief! Call the guards!”

While the auctioneer called the guards, the old priest quickly put the Prayer Ring away in the Dragonseal Chest.

It evidently stored items in a different dimension like a Garage Bag. On my list of markers, the Prayer Ring was now on an area with no map.

Afraid to lose track of it, I put a marker on the Dragonseal Chest, too.

“Please pardon that ugly intrusion... Now then, let us begin the bidding.”

Despite the incident, the auction was going on as planned.

“We’ll start at one hundred gold coins!”

As soon as the auctioneer spoke, bids arose from the first-floor seats.

They increased the bid slowly in increments ranging from one to ten gold coins.

I guess we weren’t the only ones who were here today for this specific item.

“Five hundred gold coins!”

Just as the bidding passed three hundred gold coins, a bid was called out from the noble seats.

This set the price climbing even higher.

When it crossed one thousand gold coins, I raised my card.

“Two thousand gold coins.”

That sent a stir through the auction hall.

Maybe doubling the price out of nowhere was a little excessive, but it did the trick for intimidating the crowd.

“Twenty-one hundred gold coins.”

“Twenty-two hundred gold coins.”

“Twenty-three hundred gold coins.”

“...Twenty-three hundred and one gold coins.”

The bids came one after another.

There were definitely plenty of competitors still putting up a fight.

The old merchant company had started going up in smaller increments, which meant they were probably going to drop out soon.

I kept going up one hundred coins at a time to avoid letting things get out of hand with huge bid increases off the bat.

“There’s still a lot of competition.”

“Indeed.”

The price had already gotten up to 3,900 gold coins.

Just then, there was a knock at our door.

“I’ll see who it is.”

Tifaleeza stood up to investigate our poorly timed visitor.

In the meantime, I raised my card and called out, “Four thousand gold coins.”

“W-wait a minute!”

I heard Tifaleeza’s alarmed voice and loud footsteps stomping toward me.

Our rude visitor was one of the prince’s entourage from before.

“Looks like the prince’s people have no manners... Four thousand, three hundred gold coins.”

“Why, you! It’s rude to look away when you have a guest!”

Resisting the urge to say, *You’re one to talk*, I glared at him out of the corner

of my eye.

“His Highness wants the Prayer Ring.”

“Oh yeah?”

That wasn't exactly news to me. He'd been bidding for a while now.

“...Four thousand, six hundred gold coins.”

“Y-you cur! Did you not hear me?!”

“What? Did your master order you to break the rules during the auction?”

Not appreciating the thinly veiled threat, I went ahead and cut to the chase, leaving him no room for excuses.

It would be one thing if the prince himself came to me with the request because of some vital emergency, but I wasn't going to miss a chance to free Arisa and Lulu because of some vague nonsense.

“As if a noble prince would ever do such a thing!”

“So you're doing this on your own, then... Four thousand, eight hundred gold coins.”

I wasn't about to help this brownnoser score any points.

“Leave. I have no business with you.”

“Plebeian! How dare you make a mockery of the esteemed Count Imedion's eldest son!”

The idiot charged at me with a sword. Without getting up, I caught the blade between two fingers, yanked it out of his grasp, and hit him with the business end of my “Intimidation” skill.

Since I was a little annoyed, I didn't hold back much. The point-blank pressure from my skill sent him toppling to the floor, practically foaming at the mouth.

“Five thousand gold coins.”

The number of bidders was dwindling now.

Duke Vistall seemed to have dropped out of the competition.

“Lord Kuro, are you all right?”

“Don’t worry about it. I just subdued some ruffian who pulled a sword on me.”

I hadn’t actually laid a finger on him anyway.

“Six thousand gold coins.”

“...Six thousand, one hundred gold coins.”

Oh-ho, reaching your limit?

“Seven thousand gold coins.”

Since we were approaching the finish line, I raised the bid by a full thousand.

Then I glanced over and saw the manager’s distressed-looking face.

“Nervous?”

“Yes, well... Prince Sortorik is a great man who always puts the kingdom first, yet he is also known to be merciless toward those he sees as enemies.”

“What a petty man.”

If you’re going to be king someday, you should really have enough charisma to turn even your enemies into allies, in my opinion.

“...Seven thousand, one hundred gold coins.”

The prince put in another bid.

He looked pale, as if he was getting out of his depth.

Unlike a king, a prince probably didn’t have endless supplies of money that he could use as he pleased.

“Now, are there any other bids?”

The auctioneer started counting down.

“I suppose for the sake of the Echigoya Company, I’d better step down...”

“Lord Kuro...”

“Oh, this is horrible.”

I gently patted the unhappy-looking manager and Tifaleeza on their shoulders.

Now...

“Hikaru, it’s all you.”

“Ten thousand gold coins!”

Immediately, a clear voice rang out from the first floor of the auction house.

“What?!”

My “Keen Hearing” skill picked up the prince’s cry of shock.

“Any last bids?”

“Grrr... Ten thousand and ten gold coins!”

Clearly, the prince was running out of options.

“Twenty thousand gold coins!”

“D-damn yooooooooou!”

Hikaru’s cheerful-sounding bid was met with a strangled yell from the prince as he leaned over the balcony.

Looking up, Hikaru spotted him and gave him a jaunty wave.

“D-Duke Mitsukuni! Wh-what are you doing down there...?!”

The prince’s mutter probably didn’t reach Hikaru’s ears.

“Erm... A-are there any other bids? Hmm? None at all?”

The auctioneer sounded distressed, probably because of the prince’s shout.

“W-well, if there are no more bids, then I’ll begin the countdown. Three... two...ooone... Erm, there are truly no more bids?”

The prince glared down, seething, at the auctioneer’s upturned face.

Hey, it’s not his fault.

“S-sold, then! Erm, bidder number 325 has won the Prayer Ring for twenty gold coins!”

The auctioneer was so flustered, he forgot to say the *thousand* part.

An official hurried over and whispered in his ear, prompting him to correct himself. “A-apologies. The winning bid was twenty thousand gold coins.”

“Mission complete, Ichirou!”

“Thanks, Hikaru.”

“Eh-he-he, I guess we didn’t need those two million coins after all.”

“No kidding.”

It didn’t go quite how I expected, but all’s well that ends well.

I had Hikaru come in right before the bidding on the ring just in case some of the nobles and merchants found out my bidding limit and conspired to put together more money or banknotes than me at the last minute.

This meant that the prince’s fury might turn on Hikaru instead of the Echigoya Company, but hopefully that wouldn’t happen, since she hadn’t been coerced by one of his entourage like I was.

If it came right down to it, I was sure her ancestral king power would get her through.

And if not, I’d just have to come to the rescue.

“Let’s go.”

“Yes, Lord Kuro.”

We vacated the noble’s seats, leaving the unconscious man on the floor.

But just as we were heading for the door, the light went out behind us.

“The chest! The chest is gone!”

The old priest’s panicked cry echoed through the pitch-black auction hall.

Phantom Thief

Satou here. The phrase phantom thief generally calls to mind a master of disguise who can break into even the securest of buildings and open impossible-to-crack safes with ease. Maybe that's because of you-know-who III?

"It's a thieeeeef!"

The auctioneer's shriek filled the darkness of the auction hall.

I guess I shouldn't have assumed that someone would try to steal the Prayer Ring only when it was taken out of the chest to be handed over.

"Lord Kuro..."

"Don't worry."

I opened my map and marker list.

The Prayer Ring was still inside the Dragonseal Chest.

As for its location—they'd gotten farther than I expected.

It was already outside the auction hall.

"Damn phantom thief..."

The Dragonseal Chest appeared to be in the hands of a phantom thief called Pippin.

I used my Space Magic spell Clairvoyance to lock on to him.

No way was I letting him escape.

"So it was a phantom thief who took it?" Miss Manager asked.

"That's right. I'll go get it now."

I did my best imitation of Hayato the Hero's gallant smile to reassure the worried-looking Tifaleeza before I took off.

I used “Warp” to leave the room, kicked through the nearest window, and shot upward using “Skyrunning.”

As I used “Flashrunning” and my map’s marker to close the distance between us, the phantom thief soon came into view with the naked eye, teleporting from rooftop to rooftop.

“Space Magic...?”

According to my map information, the phantom thief had a borderline rule-breaking hereditary skill called “Short-Range Teleportation.” Between that and skills like “Item Box” and “Disguise,” even the most elaborate thefts must be a breeze.

“But that ends now.”

I used “Flashrunning” to land in front of Phantom Thief Pippin.

“You sure got here quick.”

The thief’s breathing was ragged. His “Short-Range Teleportation” must use a lot of stamina.

“Give back what you stole.”

I held out my hand.

“All right, you got me... Yeah, right!”

Pippin flung an empty bottle at me mid-sentence and teleported to the ground.

“You’re wasting your time.”

I jumped down with “Flashrunning” and chased Pippin through the clouds of dust.

Pippin teleported from one corner to the next in the mazelike alleyways of the lower part of town.

There was hardly any time lag between each of his “Short-Range Teleportation” jumps; his skill level must be ridiculously high.

The short distance between corners was a bit too tight for “Flashrunning,” so I switched to “Warp” as I followed him.

I'd chased a target who kept using "Short-Range Teleportation" once before, the demon-possessed gjallarhorn in the Muno territory, but it was a whole lot harder in a complex maze of passages when following someone who knew them incredibly well.

Still, his stamina wouldn't last forever.

It was only a matter of time before I would catch up.

I saw another empty bottle drop and shatter in the alley Pippin had vanished into.

Based on the familiar scent, it was probably a mass-market MP recovery potion.

Pippin must be using potions to keep restoring his magic so he could go on using "Short-Range Teleportation."

"Whoops."

Pippin had brought down some garbage as he fled, blocking my path.

This wasn't the first time he'd used some kind of preprepared trap or underhanded method to slow me down.

None of them were too serious, but the total amount of time loss they added up to was still nothing to sneeze at.

"...He stopped?"

Frowning suspiciously at the dot on my radar, I ran toward the end of the narrow alley.

"A market...?"

The slightly curved road was lined with stalls and packed with people shopping.

"Ah, he's trying to lose me in the crowd."

With some delicate "Warp" maneuvers, I used some spying skills to hide in the crowd myself as I approached the thief.

A long-haired lady-killer stood kissing a pretty and prim young lady in the shadows of some crates behind a stall.

As I walked over, he flapped his hand at me as if shooing away an annoying dog or cat.

That's some solid acting chops.

"Is she here to carry the stolen goods?"

"What the hell d'you think you're—"

Without waiting for him to carry on the act, I moved to lightly strike at the man's stomach.

As soon as I stepped forward, Pippin vanished.

My radar showed that he'd teleported to the other side of the building.

In those precious few seconds, the woman who'd been with him was already fleeing into the crowd.

Which one should I chase?

"I've got this one!"

I heard Hikaru's voice from above.

Looking up, I saw her jumping down from the top of the building.

As the shoppers screamed in alarm, I thanked Hikaru via Telephone.

"Tch, on my tail again already?"

Pippin disappeared, tossing aside his lady-killer disguise mask.

He must have fled behind another building.

I used "Flashrunning" to jump over the building and give chase.

"Heh-heh-heh. Bad luck, sir. If you're looking for the ring, I'm afraid I gave it to that girl already."

"You're lying."

I dismissed Pippin's bluff instantly.

Pippin still had the chest, and my marker list still showed the ring in an area without a map. Since the girl didn't seem to have the "Item Box" skill, a Garage Bag, or anything else of the sort, Pippin was definitely the one to catch.

“...Tch!”

Just as I was about to catch up to him with “Warp,” Pippin vanished again.

I thought about using Unit Deployment to go after him, but my unaccustomed, improvised teleportation wouldn’t stand much of a chance against an experienced “Short-Range Teleportation” user with the home-field advantage. Frustrating though it was, I had to keep chasing him using “Warp” and “Flashrunning.”

Besides, I did promise Arisa that I wouldn’t abuse Unit Deployment.

Speak of the devil, Arisa contacted me via Tactical Talk as I continued the chase.

“Master! Was that you and Hikaru who went flying past just now?”

“Yeah, the ring was stolen. I’m giving chase now.”

“What?! That’s terrible!” Arisa exclaimed. *“But what kind of person must this thief be that you haven’t been able to catch them yet?”*

“It’s a phantom thief by the name of Pippin. He’s using ‘Short-Range Teleportation’ and his familiarity with the downtown area to give me the runaround.”

I had no idea how he was teleporting past buildings to areas he couldn’t even see without a guide like a seal slate.

“Let us help with the chase, then!”

“Thanks. He’s heading around the royal capital by way of the lower part of town.”

I took Arisa up on her offer, mostly so that this wouldn’t take all day.

I conveyed Pippin’s route to them by using the area numbers we’d come up with during the red-ropes incident.

“Okey-dokey, we’re on it! We’ll cut him off and catch him like a rat in a trap!”

The rest of the group all cheered their responses.

All I had to do, then, was play the role of the cat chasing the rat right where we wanted him.



"...He's here."

"Gaaaaah!"

Mia's summoned water pseudo-spirit undine rose from a puddle, blocking Pippin's path.

While he was distracted, I managed to grab his shirt—but just as I expected, he slipped out of it and fled like a lizard shedding its tail.

"Mrrr."

"Thanks, Mia."

"Mm."

I kept chasing after Pippin.

"You shall not pass, sir!"

Pochi stood in a corner of the alley with her sword at the ready to block Pippin's path again.

"I'm not letting some kid beat me!"

Pippin started charging toward her as if to knock her aside.

Pochi grinned, knowing he was underestimating her.

"...Or catch me."

Pippin teleported right before he reached Pochi.

She flew into a panic, her target suddenly out of sight.

"Waaah, sir!"

"It's fine. I'll get him."

I patted Pochi's head on my way by.

"Nin-niiin...?"

"Yikes! What is this, a spiderweb?!"

Tama's ninjutsu caught Pippin amid some stacks of lumber.

Well, that was anticlimactic.

“Don’t underestimate the great Pippin!”

The piles of lumber toppled, and Pippin vanished beneath them in a cloud of dust.

“Mew! Oh nooo...?”

As the kindhearted Tama worriedly searched for Pippin, I put the logs away in my Storage.

“Gooone?”

A man’s shirt and trousers fluttered in the sticky webs.

This guy is quick on his feet all right.

“Master, loook...?”

Tama picked up a rainbow-colored gem.

I recognized it as the national treasure of Blybrogha Kingdom that Shadow Thief Sharururuun had tried to steal in the royal castle: the Dragon’s Eye.

Pippin must have dropped it, although I had no idea what he was going to use it for.

Thanking Tama for the discovery, I gave my next order.

“Good work, Tama. Sorry to rush you, but can you head to the next checkpoint right away?”

“Aye-aye, siiir?”

Tama gave me a brisk salute as I went on following the light that marked Pippin on my radar.

“If you wish to pass—”

“Oh shit!”

Pippin teleported before Liza could finish her sentence.

He must have sensed the overwhelming difference in strength between them.

“...Am I really that frightening?”

“Not at all,” I reassured Liza, who looked strangely hurt, before I kept chasing Pippin toward the spot where Lulu was stationed above.

“Ack! Gah! Where’s this coming from?! Dammmiiiiit!”

I heard Pippin’s telltale screams up ahead.

I couldn’t blame him for being upset. No matter how many times he kept teleporting, there were always bullets shooting at his feet.

“I’m sorry; I can’t shoot anymore. There are children in my line of fire.”

“I will protect the larvae, Lulu, I declare.”

Nana stood in the way of Pippin, who was running toward an empty lot where children were playing.

“I will not allow you to put larvae in danger, I declare!”

“I wasn’t planning on it!”

Pippin nimbly dodged Nana’s Foundation attack Magic Arrow before vanishing.

The arrow broke a potion vial Pippin had dropped and sent shards shattering toward my face, which I quickly brushed away.

“Master, I protected the larvae, I report.”

“Good work.”

I waved at the smug-looking Nana, as well as Lulu atop the water tower, as I entered the last leg of the chase.

Pippin didn’t have much MP left; the potion he dropped while dodging Nana’s Magic Arrow must have been his last. He should run out completely after a few more teleportations.

I leaped over a building with “Flashrunning” to keep chasing Pippin beyond it.

“Here comes the headliner! Don’t expect to get away from the great and adorable Arisa!”

“Tch, a magic-using brat?!”

Wearing a very magical-looking wide-brimmed hat and robe, Arisa was

waiting around the bend with an old staff at the ready. When did she even buy that outfit?

“Check...”

“I’m not giving you time to chant!”

Pippin raised his arm as he ran toward Arisa.

“...and mate!”

Arisa’s nonlethal Burn Flash spell engulfed Pippin in flame. At that same moment, a hidden undine emerged from the puddle at his feet and caged him with flowing chain-saw-like pillars of water.

“As if such flimsy flames could stop me!”

Pippin shook off the flames, then froze in place for a moment.

“B-but why?!”

“Hee-hee! Don’t think you can use a gift like ‘Short-Range Teleportation’ before the mighty mage Arisa, either.”

Arisa flashed the flustered thief a clumsy wink.

“A teleportation barrier?!”

Pippin clicked his tongue and tried to force his way through the water pillars trapping him.

His skin ripped where it touched the water, sending up a serious spray of blood.

Startled, Mia instinctively shut off the water pillars by mistake.

“Sorry—”

“No worries,” I assured her.

After all, an even more fiendish obstacle awaited him no matter which way he ran.

“No entry, sir!”

“Not here, eitherrr?”

“Get outta—”

Pippin tried to push past them and fell into a pit.

“Manhole jutsuuu?”

“Tama’s amazing, sir!”

Looking closer, I noticed a shovel lying at the side of the alley, although I didn’t see the displaced dirt anywhere.

This ninjutsu apparently required a lot of preparation in advance.

“Now, would you mind giving back the Prayer Ring you stole?”

Without his teleportation, Pippin couldn’t escape us.

He was already in checkmate, just like Arisa had said.

“Tch!”

With a bitter grimace, Pippin shoved a hand into the bag at his waist and pulled out the Dragonseal Chest.

That was a little too easy.

A sequence of memories flashed through my mind: the Dragon’s Eye that was lying in the alley, the face of Shadow Thief Sharururuun who’d tried to steal it in the royal castle, the leprechaun prince talking about its abilities, and Miss Manager’s explanation of the Dragonseal Chest.

Don’t tell me...

“Sharururuun!”

Pippin shouted and tossed the chest into the air.

An arm stuck out of the third-story window of the housing complex next to us. It was the prim beauty who Hikaru was supposed to be chasing.

The beastfolk girls ran toward the building.

But before they could reach it, and just as Shadow Thief Sharururuun was about to catch the chest, it was suddenly swept away in a gust of wind.

“Touch...dooooown!”

It was Hikaru.

“Niiice?”

“Very great catch, sir!”

Tama and Pochi cheered, and the rest of the group looked up, too.

“Hear my prayer...”

“That’s enough.”

As Pippin began muttering, I swept the Prayer Ring out of his hand.

“Whaaa—?!” Arisa cried. “Why’d he have the ring?!”

“How...did you know...?”

“Just a gut instinct, I guess?”

I’d realized that Pippin might have dropped the Dragon’s Eye after using it to open the Dragonseal Chest.

“Sergeant Pochi, Sergeant Tama, apprehend the criminal!”

“Gotchaaa...?”

“You’re under arrest, sir!”

I jumped back with the ring, and Tama and Pochi hopped into the hole to restrain Pippin and tie him up tightly.

I stole the rest of his magic while I was grabbing the ring so that he wouldn’t be able to teleport away for a while.

Glancing at my log, I saw I’d gotten a few new titles.

> Title Acquired: Persistent Pursuer

> Title Acquired: Bane of Thieves

“Yeah, sorry ’bout that. It’s so different from the royal capital I know that I kept letting her get away.”

Hikaru came down with the chest.

Despite her carefree tone, she seemed a little sad.

The chase must have brought back memories of the old royal capital.

“Master, shall I capture this girl as well?”

Liza returned carrying an unconscious Shadow Thief Sharururuun.

Unlike Tama and Pochi, who’d turned back partway through, Liza kept chasing the girl to get the chest back.

“Yeah, and be thorough. She’s a slippery one, too.”

After all, she’d casually shown up here in spite of being thrown into a dungeon after I captured her in the royal capital.

“Right, can I ask you a question?”

I turned to Phantom Thief Pippin, who Tama and Pochi had wrapped up in ropes like something out of a gag manga.

“What?”

“Why did you steal the ring?”

“Ha! How could any phantom thief worth his salt resist going after the treasure of a century?!”

Oh, is that all?

Here I thought there might be some dramatic reason he needed the Prayer Ring. I guess I shouldn’t have bothered worrying.

“Can I ask something, too?” Hikaru chimed in. “Why didn’t you steal the ring when they took it out of the chest at the beginning of the auction?”

“Hmph, only a buffoon would strike when security is tightest.” Pippin looked smug. “The smartest time to strike is after they’ve let their guard down.”

“You’re awfully proud of yourself for a criminal.”

“Mm. Judgment.”

“Hey, stop! Not the face!”

At Mia’s command, the undines pelted Pippin’s face with water.

Now, time to turn these guys in.

“Duchess Mitsukuni, Team Pendragon, I thank you for your aid.”

I bowed to Hikaru and the girls formally before bringing the pair back to the guards' station.

Maybe such an act wasn't necessary in front of thieves, but I was worried that it would look unnatural for Kuro to be teaming up with Satou's group.



"I'm back."

After delivering the Dragon's Eye and the thieves to the guards' headquarters, and the chest with the ring returned to the auction hall, I explained the situation to Tifaleeza and Miss Manager.

Since Hikaru was technically the one who won the auction for the ring, it was her job to do the paperwork and pick it up at the auction hall.

It took longer than expected; the sun had already set by the time we got back to the royal capital mansion.

"Welcome back."

"Welcooome?"

As usual, Mia and Tama were the first to greet me, followed by the other girls in turn as we headed for the living room.

"Master, dinner is ready in the garden."

"Thanks, Lulu."

Another evening of enjoying the sakura while we ate sounded nice.

The sakura trees in the Shiga Kingdom bloomed for longer than the Yoshino cherry blossoms of Japan, though the season seemed to be winding down.

"Well then, a toast to our success at the auction—cheers!"

"Cheers!"

Everyone raised a glass and responded in unison.

Aside from Hikaru, their drinks were all nonalcoholic.

"Shiga sake goes great with crispy fish skins... Don't you think, Ichirou?"

"Yeah, it does."

Although sakura salmon were still in season for a while yet, I wouldn't be able to buy them anymore once we left the royal capital, so I was definitely eating my fill in the meantime.

The idea that it might go better with wine than Shiga sake passed through my mind, along with the image of an *izakaya*. But I couldn't remember who from my old homeland had said that, and the image soon vanished.

"Mew?"

"Why would you eat fish skin when there's plenty of meat left, sir?"

Evidently, Tama and Pochi were a bit young to understand the appeal.

"What's wrong, Hikaru?"

"Ah-ha-ha, it's nothing."

Arisa's comment prompted me to turn toward Hikaru, who looked oddly close to tears.

"It does not seem like nothing, I declare."

"Mm, worried."

"Really, I'm fine."

Hikaru shook her head at Nana and Mia.

"I was just thinking that this really isn't my Ichirou."

A little tipsy, Hikaru looked at me with a lonesome expression.

"Whenever I said sake goes well with fish skins, my Ichirou would always say, *Wine obviously pairs better.*"

Hikaru's Ichirou Suzuki sounded like a narrow-minded guy.

Fish skins were a lot more versatile than that.

Arisa elbowed me, prompting me to pour Hikaru some more sake and add, "You must've been really close."

Next to me, Arisa wore an expression that said something like, *Is that the best you can do?!* but I preferred giving a vague answer rather than risking a topic that might upset Hikaru even more.

“Yeah, we were.”

“Close as in a couple?” Arisa asked.

“Ah-ha-ha, nope.” Hikaru shook her head. “I loved him more than anything, sure, but we couldn’t be a couple.”

“You didn’t tell him how you felt?”

“Of course I did. But he shot me down all three times.”

Hikaru closed her eyes wistfully.

“Ichirou said I was like a younger sister to him; that’s why.”

“W-well, master’s off-limits. He’s already got me.”

Hikaru’s sidelong glance toward me must have set Arisa off: she quickly spread her arms in front of me defensively.

“Mrrr.”

“Arisa...”

“Sorry, I mean he’s got *us*,” Arisa amended when Mia and Lulu protested.

“Ichirou, you’re into little girls now?”

“Of course not. I always preferred older women, and I still do.”

Especially my beloved Miss Aaze, who happened to be older than human history.

“Now, *that’s* just like my Ichirou!”

Thoroughly drunk, Hikaru wrapped her arms around me.

I was glad to see her finally smiling, at least until she started crying at the same time.

Rather than offer up inadequate words of comfort, I simply patted her head and back gently until she stopped crying.

As she finally wore herself out and fell asleep, she whispered in a voice so tender it hurt my heart: “I miss you, Ichirou.”



“I’m so sorry. This was supposed to be a celebration.”

After a short nap sobered her up, Hikaru meekly apologized to everyone.

“C’mon, don’t worry about it. Sometimes you just gotta let off some steam or you’ll explode.”

Arisa spoke on behalf of the rest of the group.

“Now, that’s enough of the gloomy talk!”

She clapped her hands briskly.

“Master!”

“All right, let’s unveil the Prayer Ring, then.”

At my signal, Hikaru took the Prayer Ring out of her “Inventory” and placed it on the table.

It glowed with a gentle blue light.

“So this is the Prayer Ring...the treasure that allows a wish granted by the gods...”

Lulu gazed at the ring.

Then her rapturous expression changed as if she’d thought of something.

“...Arisa.”

Lulu beckoned to her sister, and they exchanged a whispered conversation.

Since it seemed private, I turned off my “Keen Hearing” skill so as not to overhear.

Arisa looked surprised and stared into Lulu’s eyes for a moment before her gaze turned lovingly proud, like a mother looking at her grown-up daughter.

“...Master.”

Lulu and Arisa beckoned me over, too, and whispered in my ear.

“...Are you sure?”

I could barely believe what they were proposing.

“Yes, I think that would be best.”

“I’m totally with Lulu!”

There was no hesitation in their eyes, despite the difficulty of this decision.

They’re both so kind.

“You should be the ones to do the honors, then.”

I handed the Prayer Ring to Arisa and Lulu.

In turn, they walked over to Hikaru.

“Huh?”

“It’s a present from Lulu and me.”

They pressed the ring into Hikaru’s hand.

Realizing what they’d given her, Hikaru’s eyes widened.

“Please use it.”

“What? But...”

Openly dumbfounded, Hikaru looked at Lulu.

“Really, just take it.”

“We’ll be fine.”

“Yeah! We’ve got no problem staying as slaves for now, and I’m sure our cheat-mode master will find another way to free us from our Geist sooner or later.”

Lulu and Arisa nodded encouragingly at Hikaru.

Seeing their smiles, Hikaru’s bewildered expression turned to a complex mixture of joy, gratitude, and apology.

“Now, go on and use that thing to be reunited with your true love!”

With tears in her eyes, Hikaru turned to me questioningly. I nodded.

She gripped the ring tightly and held it to her chest, the tears finally breaking free to roll down her cheeks.

“Thank you, Arisa, Lulu. And you, Ichi...”

Then she shook her head, as if letting go of something, and corrected herself.

“Satou.”

This must be her way of showing that she saw me as the person she’d met in this world, not the Ichirou from her old one.

“I wish...”

Hikaru murmured her prayer.

Light flowed from the ring, dyeing the royal capital in dazzling blue.

It was an incredibly gentle light, warm with holy love.

And then...

Epilogue

Satou here. There are plenty of stories that end in unexpected ways, but I think most of them still wind up being happy endings. Even if there are more bad endings in a lot of games, it's not so bad when you think about it—they just make the true ending that much more meaningful.

“Um, so...what now?”

Arisa hesitantly looked at Hikaru after the blue light of the Prayer Ring had faded.

“Thank you both again. I was able to make my prayer.”

Hikaru bowed her head to us. She had wished to meet the Ichirou Suzuki from her own world.

“B-but...nothing’s happened?”

“I think it worked. The goddess said something like, *Your wish will come true soon*. Gods can be stingy, but they never lie.”

Hikaru looked deeply relieved.

It sort of seemed to me like using the ring hadn’t changed anything. I guess getting a guarantee from a god that it would happen soon was important to Hikaru, though.

I just hoped that *soon* wasn’t based on a god’s perspective of time.

“Yeah? Glad to hear it, then.”

“...Uh-huh.”

Arisa gave Hikaru an almost motherly smile.

“Then we’ll have to give you a makeover to prepare for the big reunion!”

“M-makeover?”

“Of course! Girl, we’ll make you look good enough to knock his socks off. Then you’ll land your AU version of master for sure!”

Arisa slipped into increasingly dated terminology as she encouraged Hikaru.

“Okay, Big Sister Lulu, time to teach everyone how you increased your cup size in such a short time!”

“Wha—? A-Arisa!”

Arisa dragged Lulu in to start doing aerobic exercises.

“Boing-boooing?”

“Pochi will get a glass-hour figure, too, sir!”

For some reason, Tama and Pochi joined in right away.

“Me too.”

“If Mia is joining, then I will as well, I declare.”

“H-hang on a minute, Nana! You don’t need to improve *your* figure!”

“I do not wish to be left out, I protest.”

“Oh, all right. Come join the fun, Liza!”

In the end, even Liza got dragged in, and the entire group started doing aerobics.



“...Hmm?”

As I watched the girls goofing off and exercising, I got a Telephone signal.

“Hello, Satou speaking.”

I answered the call right away. It obviously wasn’t Arisa, which meant it could only be coming from the high elf of Bolenan Forest, my dearest Miss Aaze.

“Good evening. This is Aialize.”

Her voice was always lovely to hear.

“Good evening, Miss Aaze. The sakura are lovely under the moonlight here.”

“Sakura, hmm? They’ve already stopped blooming here, and soon it’ll be time

for the azaleas.”

“That sounds nice, too. I’d love to go see them together next time I visit.”

I sensed eyes on me as I chatted with Miss Aaze, and I looked over to find Hikaru, Arisa, and several of the others staring at me.

“Is it me, or has Satou’s face gone all lovey-dovey?”

“He must’ve gotten a call from Aaze.”

“Mm. Definitely.”

I automatically touched a hand to my face.

Was it really that obvious?

I cleared my throat and used my “Poker Face” skill to smooth over my expression.

“Aaze? Who is that, Satou’s girlfriend?”

“Nope.”

“Master already proposed to her and got rejected.”

“Huh. Older, I’m guessing?”

“Try, like, a hundred million years and change.”

Come on—she’s not that old.

“A hundred m... Wait, is she a high elf?!”

“Mm.”

I couldn’t very well keep ignoring Miss Aaze, so I resumed the conversation in spite of Hikaru’s shock.

“What’s the matter?”

“It’s nothing. At any rate, to what do I owe the rare honor of your calling me?”

Usually I was the one who called her. When it was the other way around, I was always a little worried that something might be amiss in Bolenan Forest.

“Adin and the others asked me to request that you come pick them up because they’re done training.”

Adin was Nana's eldest sister. She and the rest of Nana's siblings had been training with the elves for a month or so.

"That was faster than I expected."

"Yes, they've all been working quite hard. Hiya is very proud of them."

I promised to come get them the next day and soon reluctantly ended the call.

The next day...

"Master, we are terribly sorry for the trouble."

"Don't worry about it, Adin."

The eldest sister, Number 1, now known as Adin, was the most fluent speaker of the seven homunculi now lined up in front of me.

According to my AR display, their levels had increased only by 1 or 2, but they'd gained more titles and skills that showed how intensely they'd been training over the past month.

"You all worked really hard."

"Yes, master."

The sisters puffed up their chests proudly.

"Mito! Mito is here, I declare!"

The youngest sister, Number 8, who I'd named Huit, pointed at Hikaru excitedly.

All the others turned toward her in perfect unison, as if they'd timed it deliberately.

I forgot the sisters had met Hikaru before.

"Hi again, Hachiko. And the rest of you, too."

"My name is not Hachiko; it is Huit, I declare! Master named me officially, I boast."

The other sisters all proclaimed their names to Hikaru, too.

"Ah-ha-ha, I can't remember all these right away."

Hikaru politely backed away.

“You know my sisters? I inquire.”

“That’s right, Miss Nana. When I woke up in the ruins, Hachiko—I mean Huit and the others were there with Johnny.”

“We worked as waitresses together, I declare.”

“Mito often got scolded for burning food, I report.”

“H-hey!”

The semi-long-haired Number 5, Fünf, calmly revealed Hikaru’s blunders.
I guess this Hikaru is bad at cooking, too.

“Miss Lulu! Tria mastered all of Lady Nea’s secret techniques, I report!”

“Congratulations, Tria.”

Lulu and Number 3, Tria, high-fived with both hands.

That was all well and good, but I was a little concerned about why she now had titles like Trapper, Trap Master, and Chain Conjuror.

What kind of training did they do in the elf village?

“Satou.”

“Miss Aaze.”

Aaze, who’d been working at the World Tree, came to visit the treehouse.

“Wow, Satou’s voice is, like, a full octave higher.”

“Yeah, that’s Aaze.”

“Wow, she’s gorgeous. Is she really a high elf, though? Not a human?”

“You’ve never met one before? Unlike elves, high elves have adult bodies.”

Hikaru and Arisa whispered among themselves.

“Allow me to introduce you, Miss Aaze. This is a childhood friend of sorts from my homeland, Mitsuko Takatsuki—”

“It’s Hikaru!”

Hikaru quickly spoke over me, evidently not wanting to be called Mitsuko.

“Why, she looks just like Yamato the Hero.”

“A descendant, perhaps?”

The elf teachers Mr. Hiya and Miss Lua appeared behind Miss Aaze.

“Oh, it’s Sir Hishirotoya the Mediator and Lady Lustohua the shrine maiden!”

Hikaru brightened when she saw the pair.

“I haven’t heard that title in a long time. Might you be the real Yamato, then?”

“Y-yes, that’s me. I go by Hikaru now.”

I guess they knew each other.

“I’m terribly sorry that we couldn’t maintain peace even after you helped arrange the ceasefire back then.”

“That’s in the past. Besides, that only went badly because of the interference of fools and some unfortunate coincidences.”

Sounded like they had a real history.

“Hero Yamato, you must not get distracted while addressing Lady Aaze.”

“S-sorry, Lady Lustohua.”

Lua rebuked her a little sharply because of Aaze’s awkward expression.

Hikaru turned back to Aaze and introduced herself.

“I’m Hikaru, an old friend of Satou’s... Well, Satou from a parallel universe, that is.”

“You’re his childhood friend Miss Hikaru? I am Aialize, high elf of Bolenan Forest. Please feel free to call me Aaze.”

Hikaru responded, “Of course, Miss Aaze,” only for Lua to admonish her to say “Lady Aaze” instead. I guess these two must have some complex history as well.

Since Hikaru seemed uncomfortable, we only stayed for the post-training celebration banquet before heading back to the royal capital with the sisters that very same day.

“So what are you sisters going to do now? Join our sightseeing world tour?”

“No, we would still only hold you back. I believe we will go train in the labyrinth next, as Nana did.”

The eldest sister, Adin, responded to Arisa, and the rest of the sisters nodded.

Most of them, that is. The ever-curious Huit and the cooking-obsessed Tria seemed very interested in our journey.

“Oh yeah? We’d better get you some labyrinth gear, then.”

At least they’d be able to use our Labyrinth City mansion and labyrinth villa as a base.

Since Arisa and I wouldn’t be there, I’d have to set up teleport gates like the ones connecting our royal capital home and secret base, creating a shortcut for more efficient hunting.

“Zena and the others are in Labyrinth City. Once we get there, I’ll introduce you to the guildmaster and some other friends.”

It’s always better to have more people to turn to in case of trouble.

“Master, I wish to see Spiderson, I declare.”

Huit gave a brisk salute.

Spiderson was Huit’s name for the long-legged spider crab she had tamed.

“Sure. Let’s go, then.”

We went from the teleport gate in our royal capital home to the secret base where Liza and the others did their training.

“Spiderson!”

SHPYEEEEEDAR.

Huit and Spiderson celebrated their reunion.

“Master, Spiderson seems slightly different, I observe.”

“Maybe it’s because there’s not much miasma here?”

Monsters didn’t like areas without a lot of miasma, and the tamed Spiderson had been staying in a purified area for a while now. Maybe that messed with his

biology.

“Mythical.”

Mia muttered quietly.

Maybe she meant that if Spiderson stayed near this spirit-loaded spring, he could evolve into a mythical beast?

I didn’t see any such theories in my books, but it could be a secret known only to the elves or something.

Nana’s sisters all liked the secret base, too, and decided to hang around there while we finished out our stay in the royal capital.

Oh, and the next day, I found out the real meaning behind Tria’s Trap Master and Chain Conjuror titles.

I never thought I’d see the swinging chain traps out of side-scrolling games in real life.



“Extra, extra!”

On our way to the Echigoya Company, I saw someone handing out news bulletins.

These cost money here, unlike in Japan. I gave a large copper coin.

“Wow, they have newspapers now.”

“What’s it say?”

Hikaru and Arisa peered over my shoulders.

The newspaper extra said that the anti-rebellion force sent to Vistall Duchy had taken back the first city.

“I hope this war doesn’t last long.”

“Agreed.”

We reaped a huge profit by using Storage and Return to transport large amounts of Vistall Duchy-made cotton, but I was planning to invest it in the cotton-processing villages, the nearby roads, and so on.

That had annoyed some of the profiteering nobles and merchants for a while, until we mollified them by sharing the profits. It was probably Miss Manager's sharp business sense that allowed us to make room for them to benefit without lessening the Echigoya Company's own profit.

"Mr. Satou, over here!"

A girl called out to me from the entrance to the Echigoya Company.

It was Yui Akasaki, who'd been summoned by the Lumork Kingdom from a parallel Japan—the Southern Japan Federation.

"Hey, it's been a while. Shopping?"

"Not quite! I heard the magic tool Aoi developed was being sold in stores, so my darling and I came to see it."

Yui introduced the pudgy young man next to her.

He was her fiancé, the heir to the esteemed Ghookuts merchant family of the royal capital. According to my AR display, he was also the illegitimate son of the current king. He didn't seem to have any claim to the throne, which I hoped meant Yui wouldn't get dragged into any weird power struggles.

"Ooh, a grass cutter that uses strings for the spinning mechanism? Now, that's interesting."

I guess Professor Jahado's rumored obsession with rotation wasn't just talk.

We had given Jahado, who Aoi simply called "Professor," a research lab in a corner of the Echigoya Company factory. He'd already enthusiastically analyzed my coaxial skypower engine and upgraded the design in less than half a month.

If his calculations were right, it should improve the performance by 20 or 30 percent. That was even better than I'd hoped.

Arisa, Lulu, and I left the rest of the group to shop while we went upstairs.

"Hey, it's the viscount and Miss Master Lulu!"

The redheaded Neru approached us excitedly.

"Hey, Neru. Helping out at the main branch today?"

"Yup! Since we've got more franchised locations of the café now, we're doin'

some research here at HQ.”

She put on the shop uniform purely because it was cute and wound up getting sent to help on the sales floor.

“Do you have a moment, miss?”

“Sure thing! On my way!”

Neru ran over to help a customer.

“You weren’t always a viscount, were you, Mr. Satou?”

“No, I was an honorary knight when we met in the old capital.”

Yui had a good memory.

“From an honorary knight to a viscount? Th-that’s unheard-of!”

Yui’s fiancé looked shocked, then realized he’d been rude.

“My bad—I mean, I’m sorry, Viscount. Please pardon my rudeness.”

He bowed his head to me politely.

This boy seemed well-put-together for his young age. Yui’s future was looking bright.

After checking out the grass cutter with the pair, we headed upstairs to meet with Miss Manager and Tifaleeza.

We were here today to discuss proposed specialties for the settlement we were developing.

“So this is a tomato?”

“It looks delicious.”

“It’s a very nutritious vegetable, although not everyone likes the texture inside.”

“These are grown near the town of Puta, just east of the old capital. They’re known as redfruits there.”

I grew them in my experimental farm in Labyrinth City, too. But that wasn’t nearly enough to increase the popularity of tomatoes in cooking; thus, I wanted to have them here, too.

At the moment, the first wave of settlers had just arrived at the first village I made with my magic, while the trial digging had only just begun on the mines. I was hoping to work out the kinks in this first trial run before building more villages and tunnels.

“Miss Master Lulu, I’ve preheated the stove!”

“Miss Master Lulu, the dough’s all prepared, too!”

“Thank you both. Master, I’m going to teach them the pizza recipe.”

Lulu headed for the kitchen with the Echigoya Company chef and Neru, who’d changed into a cook’s coat from her uniform.

My plan was to add pizza and omelet rice to the menu at the café to help tomatoes become more widely known. Maybe we could even make a specialty restaurant down the line.

While we waited for Lulu, Miss Manager chatted to me about rumors from around the Shiga Kingdom and some other central nations.

“So Yowork Kingdom is working with the Vistall Duchy rebel army...?”

Yowork Kingdom was the neighboring nation that had absorbed Arisa’s homeland of Kuvork Kingdom.

I guess taking over Kuvork Kingdom wasn’t enough for the king of Yowork Kingdom.

While I didn’t want to get involved in any wars between humans, I was entertaining the idea of going to Yowork Kingdom to try to hunt down the court mage who had put the Geist on Arisa and Lulu.

It’d be nice if I could just use map search, but I would need to find some clues from someone familiar with Yowork Kingdom first. At that point, I might as well just go there myself with “Flashrunning.”



“Lord Kuro, this is our take from the items we sold at auction.”

A few days after the auction, I popped by the Echigoya Company as Kuro and was shown a table stacked with a mountain of gold coin pouches.

This was just the proceeds from the auction; the money we made from the Magic Swords and other items we'd sold before the auction to bleed some of the nobles and merchants dry was elsewhere.

"We'll invest this money in new ventures. I'll leave the details up to you, Manager. You can use the rest of the money we prepared for the auction, too."

The amount of money we had saved up was so large that just stashing it away in Storage might have a detrimental effect on the kingdom's currency circulation.

"L-Lord Kuro! 130,000 gold coins is too much to use for anything short of expanding the royal capital."

Miss Manager sounded dismayed at the task I was trying to drop on her.

I didn't think it was that big of a number, but I guess it might be a lot to use all at once.

I'd already taken back the 20,000 gold coins that came from my own pocket for the auction. And of course, I returned the money Hikaru and the others threw in along with some thank-you gifts.

"Expanding the royal capital..."

I could easily level the ground and build the walls with my magic—no, wait. It'd create more jobs to have them built normally, as long as it wasn't with slave labor.

"That might be good for the royal capital's employment rate."

"Lord Kuro, if we invest our funding in that, there's a high possibility that we wouldn't be able to find enough staff for the farming and mining village projects."

I thought it would be fine, since the royal capital has several times the population of the average city, but I should probably respect Tifaleeza's view, since she knew more about the state of affairs here.

"Gotcha. Sorry for the careless suggestion."

"No, please pardon me for remarking upon it."

“Come to think of it, Seiryuu County’s looking for investors to develop its labyrinth, too.”

“I don’t know if outside companies can enter that market, but I can look into it.”

It was possible that they had enough funding already, too. There had been a lot of nobles backing Seiryuu County at the kingdom meeting.

“Other than that, I guess the obvious play would be to expand our own ventures...”

All three of us traded ideas for how to use the money. In the end, we went with my proposal of opening more branch stores in the Shiga Kingdom and surrounding areas, expanding on our production of things like textiles and stockings, giving the cafés more funding, and increasing the amount of facilities around the mining area.

That still used up only about a third of the money, though. We decided to get ideas from the other staff members and Arisa, the company’s official adviser. Hopefully Arisa wouldn’t suggest anything too insane.

“When can we start work on the new branches?”

“The shops themselves should only take about a month to prepare, I would think...”

“But we wouldn’t be able to train the staff in such a short time. It would take half a year at least to prepare someone for the role of running a branch in a far-off land.”

Tifaleeza amended Miss Manager’s estimation.

Personally, I mostly just wanted to set up more locations where I could easily teleport using Unit Deployment or Return, but it seemed it was going to take longer than I thought.

“Lord Kuro, while we’re training new personnel, perhaps we could send a team to secure a property in advance and research demand in the areas in question?”

Miss Manager made a helpful suggestion when she noticed me lost in

thought.

That would achieve my main goal of opening more branches.

“Excellent idea.”

I approved it immediately and had Tifaleeza sort out the specifics of the plan.

Normally, Tifaleeza would get to work right away—but this time, for some reason, she was just staring at...my hands?

Ah. I got so excited about Miss Manager’s proposal that I had grabbed her hand in both of mine without even realizing it.

Manager Eluterina was frozen in apparent shock, her cheeks bright red.

Oops, this is borderline harassment.

“Sorry, Manager. Excuse me.”

“O-of course, Lord Kuro.”

Okay, just please don’t hold your hand to your chest with such a wistful expression.

Tifaleeza’s cold glare threatened to freeze us both over.



A few days before we were scheduled to leave the royal capital, I went to the royal academy with Hikaru and my group.

“Miss Pochi, Miss Tamaaa!”

“Oh, our henchmen, sir!”

“Cyna too?”

Pochi and Tama’s friends were nearby.

“You can go play.”

“Aye!”

“Yaaay, sir!”

I could tell they wanted to run over and play with their friends. As soon as I gave permission, they took off like a shot.

Their number of henchmen had gone up from the initial three to around ten. The pair seemed to see it as something like friends anyway; maybe they had acquired more while they were hanging out.

We'd better come back to the royal capital on a regular basis so the pair could keep visiting their precious new friends.

"Aaah! It's Misanaria from Bolenan Forest!"

Miss Athena, a member of the Shiga Thirty-Three Staves and Sakura Protector, pointed at Mia while carrying a heavy book in her other hand.

"Jibcloud."

"I-it's not what it looks like! I didn't borrow this book because my superiors who took your class were all raving about it! I-it's just a coincidence! That's all! I just happened to see it in the library and borrowed it because it looked decent! Got a problem with that?!"

"Nope."

Mia only shook her head seriously in response to Athena's rather *tsundere*-sounding speech.

"Useful. Work hard."

"...Huh?"

"She says it's a very informative book and that you should study it hard and keep improving."

Arisa translated Mia's incomprehensibly short statements for the confused Athena.

"Thank... I mean, whatever! I don't need you to tell me that! You may have outdone me last time, but next time we meet, I swear I'll come out on top!"

"Mm. Can't wait."

Mia nodded calmly as Athena huffed and puffed.

We walked on toward our main objective at the royal academy, leaving her standing there, flummoxed by Mia's unexpected response.

"Miss Lulu! Miss Nana!"

Mr. Gouen's daughter Sherin ran over, waving excitedly from the direction of the knights' school.

Compared to when we first met, her running was steady and her breath even.

Behind her was Mr. Heim of the Eight Swordsmen of Shiga, presumably here as her chaperone. Our eyes met, and I gave him a nod.

"I passed!"

"Congratulations, Sherin!"

"I celebrate your acceptance, I declare."

Sherin hugged Lulu and Nana with a huge smile.

She must have passed the entrance exam and gotten into the knights' school.

The rest of us all congratulated her as well.

I gave her a stamina-recovery pendant made with a small bloodstone as a celebratory gift, in case she got injured at the knights' school.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a Holy Knight in uniform running up to Mr. Heim.

"...What?!"

Heim bellowed so unexpectedly that we all turned toward him.

Noticing this, he quickly lowered his voice, but it was too late. My "Keen Hearing" skill had picked up the Holy Knight's report.

"H-hey, what do you suppose is going on?"

"Seems the anti-rebellion force that was sent to Vistall Duchy got obliterated."

I responded to Arisa in a low voice.

Evidently, the chaos in the northwest of the Shiga Kingdom was far from over.

I'd better avoid getting caught up in that mess when I go look for the Geist-using court mage in Yowork Kingdom.

Afterword

Hello, this is Hiro Ainana.

Thank you so much for picking up *Death March to the Parallel World Rhapsody*, Volume 18!

As always, it's thanks to the support of you lovely readers that I can keep putting out more volumes. I'll do my best to add even more fun and excitement as the story goes on, so I hope you'll come along for the ride.

Since the last volume came out in August, this one is coming out in March, a little sooner than usual.

This March has certainly been a busy one. As a full-time author, my work life wasn't particularly eventful aside from trying a few new things, but I did encounter some rather difficult things on the personal end. I sincerely hope that I never have to give someone CPR and ride with them in an ambulance ever again, for the sake of my own life span as well.

Now, I think it's about time to get into the details of this volume as usual.

Satou and Mito were finally reunited in the previous volume, except Satou was the only one who realized it at the time.

As you might realize by rereading older volumes, there were a few pieces of odd information between Satou and Mito. Yes, unlike the web novel, in this version the two of them are actually _____. You'll know what the rest of that sentence would say once you read this volume.

Mito's feelings echo in the background as the story continues, focusing on Satou's efforts to acquire a particular item in the auction. Summarized like that, it sounds just like the web novel, but I rewrote so much that you'd be hard-pressed to find a single scene that remains the same. And of course, there are side stories still going strong.

I overhauled the royal academy arc, which was very popular in the web version, and added plenty of fun new scenes. And of course, there's Pochi and Tama's field trip, too!

And Sherin, the new character who appears in the frontispiece illustration for this volume, joins Pochi and Tama in the spotlight, too.

She's actually the daughter of Mr. Gouen, who was forced into a difficult battle a few volumes ago. You'll have to read the rest of this volume to find out how she gets involved with Satou's crew.

I don't want to spoil too much, so let's wrap this section up here.

Before the acknowledgments, one quick announcement.

As you may have already seen on the official site or an insert flyer, *Death March*, Volume 19 (which is scheduled to release next spring) will have a special edition that includes a drama CD—a series first!

In the audio drama, Satou returns from the royal capital to Labyrinth City, where Zena brings him a book that leads to everyone teaming up to go on a quest together. It's a brand-new short story that I wrote just for this CD.

Please wait for the cast to be announced on the official site. I, too, am excited to find out who'll be playing Miss Karina.

And now for the usual acknowledgments!

My editors A and I always give such wonderful suggestions and rewriting advice. They get rid of any confusing or long-winded passages and redundant sentences and add more charm and realism to each scene. I hope I can continue to depend on their advice and encouragement for a long time to come. We've also got a new addition as of the end of this volume, Mr. S of the editorial department, who will no doubt bring fresh perspective and power to the world of *Death March*.

And of course, I am eternally grateful to Shri for breathing life into *Death March* with magnificent illustrations in every volume. I especially adore the pitch-perfect illustration of Sherin for this volume's frontispiece.

Thank you also to the editorial department at Kadokawa Books, as well as

everyone else who was involved with the release, distribution, sales, promotion, and multimedia aspects of this volume.

And finally, my heartfelt thanks to all of you, the readers!!

Thank you so much for reading all the way to the end!

Let's meet again in the next volume for a tour around various provinces!

Hiro Ainana

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